

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN
OSHKOSH

CAMPUS
COVID
STORIES

of the
University of Wisconsin Oshkosh

A Humans of Oshkosh Special Project
Vol. IX 2023
Grace Lim, Editor



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Vol. IX 2023

Edited by Grace Lim
Designed by Shawn McAfee
Principal Photography by Pat Flood

To listen to the Campus COVID oral stories
or read the complete transcripts, please
scan the QR code, which will take you to
the Campus COVID Stories page in the
University Archives at UW Oshkosh.



Stories were collected by instructor Grace Lim and her students in the Quest III “Telling Stories for Fun, Profit and World Peace” classes in Fall 2021 and Spring 2022 and students from The Honors College. Interviews were conducted either in person, email, phone and or video chat; some stories were provided by the participants of this project. We apologize for any errors as we are imperfect humans.

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Dedication

To the humans of the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh
who showed incredible resiliency and resolve during
the time of COVID.

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Note from the Editor

Living and learning during the early days of COVID was hard, really hard. There's no arguing that. So why tell the story of how students and staff at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh responded to a global pandemic that has claimed way too many lives? Why, after three years, would we want to revisit those dark days especially when a deadly and mutating virus is still among us?

I teach a class about community engagement and storytelling at UW Oshkosh. Pre-COVID, my students go out into the community to talk to strangers about life and death and everything in between. Since 2014, we've shared thousands of true personal stories that connect us on our Humans of Oshkosh Facebook page. Then, the pandemic came and changed everything. To help us process what was happening to us and to the world, we interviewed 120 people throughout the University about their experiences living, teaching, serving and learning in the time of COVID.

The COVID-19 pandemic has left its mark on all of us. Lives were lost, opportunities missed, plans were interrupted—and heroes, in a variety of forms, stepped up. Telling the story of our collective trauma, loss and resilience is the goal of Campus COVID Stories, a multimedia project of the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh.

This two-year project is the brainchild of Chancellor Andrew Leavitt, who recognized, early in the pandemic, that we were living through a defining moment in the 21st Century. He knew that documenting the University's experience would be a service to future generations. He also wanted to avoid the missed opportunities of the past. After the 1918 influenza pandemic, which is believed to have infected about one-third of the world's population, little effort was made to document and preserve the experiences of the then-campus community. Perhaps, that was because much media attention was paid to soldiers fighting in World War I.

We know almost nothing about that time in our campus history. A scouring of yearbooks, local newspapers and University archives tells us that daily temperature checks became a part of student life, club activities were restricted and campus was closed twice for almost a month each time. Sadly, there's no real record of the impact of the influenza pandemic on the campus community, how the faculty, students and staff coped with the crisis or the lives most certainly lost.

To ensure that the stories of the COVID-19 pandemic aren't lost to history, it became clear that we needed to move quickly to



Instructor Grace Lim with Honors College students (l-r) Tanner Sarauer, Cory Sparks, Emelia Smith and MaryAnn Reindl.



document our history even as we were living through it.

Students from my 2021 Fall and Spring 2022 Quest 3 classes as well as four students from the Honors College working on their capstone project were marshaled to produce the Campus COVID Stories project. University Archivist Joshua Ranger helped with the questions for the oral story interviews, which focused on early 2020 through 2021. He also constructed the Campus COVID timeline using official communications and announcements of the University, UW System and other offices as well as media reports, and his staff processed the interviews for long-term archival preservation.

My students started by sharing their own campus COVID stories with each other, which led to a plan to document oral histories from other students, faculty, administrators and staff members. All the recordings and transcripts which now exceed 1.5 million words will be preserved in the University archives. For this book, we culled a number of those stories, including those from the custodians who cared for the school to the leadership team that set up the policies for the campus COVID response*. Now I have to insert a caveat here about these oral stories. These are stories from us, imperfect humans with imperfect memories. As time passes our memories fade and the exact details of what happened or when it happened may not be quite right, but that's OK. As history tells us, we humans persevere because we try to do the best we can.

In doing so we were able to document the startling complexity and planning that went into the University's response to the crisis. You'll read about the decision to shut down in the spring of 2020, and the challenges of shifting, almost overnight, to online learning. We'll take you behind the scenes of the Emergency Operations Committee (EOC) and the people who worked countless hours to keep people safe while preserving students' opportunities to learn.

Those stories include the University police chief who, without any background in virology or pandemic response, used his training in "hot spot" policing to track positive cases and contain the spread of the virus. Kurt Leibold's approach was so effective that other universities began to model their own response after the UW Oshkosh strategy.

The oral stories in this project have not been sanitized. There were, not surprisingly, reckless decisions by students, who defied rules by leaving isolation dorms—actions that no doubt caused the virus to spread. We also heard from



Ene Priscilla Idoko (l) interviewed by Michelle Miller.



Chancellor Andrew Leavitt interviewed by Tanner Sarauer.

students who spoke honestly and painfully about their struggle with mental health and the loneliness of isolation. You'll learn of the heartbreak of the University's athletes and coaches, who lost once-in-a-lifetime opportunities as tournaments, track meets and national competitions shut down. Lauren Karnitz, alumna and gymnastics coach, who missed her chance at a national title as a student athlete by a year, spoke achingly about how the pandemic stopped her athletes' championship run and how she and the team dealt with the aftermath.

And you will, I hope, be inspired by the selflessness and goodwill that permeated the campus community during this crisis.

After everyone else left for the safety of home, Vicki Stadler and Mandy Olesen, a mother-daughter custodial team stayed at work, showing us what it truly means to be an essential worker. Nursing instructor Heidi Hansen, many of her colleagues and nursing students became frontline workers in the community.

When it became clear that the campus COVID dorm needed more oversight to keep students safe, Chancellor Leavitt put his own health at risk, donned an N95 mask and worked the front desk of the dorm during the weekend that registered the highest number of positive COVID cases.

Alayne Peterson, an associate professor of English, was diagnosed with breast cancer the second week of the Fall 2020 semester. Her students marveled that she missed only one class as she underwent treatment for her cancer. She, in turn, marvels at the grace her students extended to her during that time.

The University's COVID response was not just about shutting down. It was also about the planning and resolve to bring us all back together.

When the University opened to in-person instruction Fall 2020, the campuses distributed more than 20,000 masks to students, faculty and staff. The University, under the guidance of the Emergency Operations Committee, had the foresight and the fortitude to continue imposing masking requirements even as others in the community and the state lifted restrictions.

And in what became a tremendous source of Titan pride, the University also hosted one of the first community antigen testing sites in the nation, serving not only the campus but the local community at large. The effort, again, became a model throughout the state and country.

In collecting the experiences that make up Campus COVID Stories, one thing became abundantly clear. Numerous people, at great personal cost, worked largely behind the scenes to maintain the safety of our campus community. It was an

exhausting and traumatic time for those on the frontlines of the COVID response, and many of those we spoke to cried as they shared their stories. We cried with them too.

And we owe them a debt of gratitude.

During the tragedy of the global pandemic, the people who make up the UW Oshkosh community stayed strong, supported their friends, colleagues and strangers, and kept us all safe. It is one of the most remarkable findings of the pandemic experience that during this time, as far as the University is aware the campus community did not lose anybody—administrator, faculty, staff or student—to COVID-19.

Ultimately, I hope you will agree that Campus COVID Stories is an epic tale of strength, resilience and the human spirit. It's about a University community rallying together during a crisis, caring for each other and emerging stronger and more connected on the other side.

Grace Lim, 2023

Lecturer and Editor

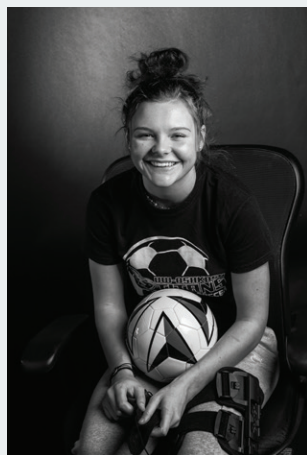
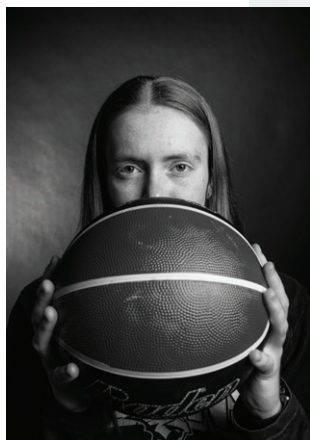
The University of Wisconsin Oshkosh

*Black and white portraits shot by University photographer Pat Flood.

Book designed by Shawn McAfee, '79.



Fall 2021 Student Storytellers



(top l-r)

Lydia Crow, Michelle Miller, Nikki Censky, Piper Green
Shahaque Rahim, Summer Ruff, Taycee Zach, Tom Cermak
Zoe Malone

(opposite page, top l-r)

Adam Pulvermacher, Allison Ruiz, Ashley Klopatek, Brandon Kaiser
Collin Laffin, Holly Baierl, Jordyn Raba, Kennedy Rud
Kory Helm, Lauryn Berg, Leah Matthews, Lindsay Thaves

Fall 2021 Student Storytellers



Once COVID hit, whatever progress we were making as an institution when it comes to culture, diversity and inclusion immediately stopped, because you can be on the same computer screen with a student, but that's not real engagement. That's not a real connection or college experience. Going virtual just created that divide. We were experiencing a recurring theme from students being at home. Many had difficulty focusing on school due to family responsibilities. More often in the Southeast Asian Hmong community, we had students who were at home, and for all intents and purposes, they were basically asked to be the babysitters. Their parents or guardians didn't understand they were in school at the time. The students would have to say, "I can't cook, clean, or watch the babies, because I'm here to do my homework and be in class." And some of the parents just didn't understand. Multiple students said they would literally go lock themselves in their room because their family members would be asking for help around the house. These recurring issues of having to deal with those distractions created road-blocks for our students and our departments.

Byron Adams, 2022

Director, Multicultural Initiatives Services



I'm so grateful. Every time I walk out there on the court, every time I hear the national anthem. I remember our first game after our season was canceled, I looked at (guard) Leah Porath, and we were both crying because we're playing again.

Nikki Arneson, 2021



Academic misconduct just skyrocketed during the pandemic. Plagiarism was the biggest thing, which wasn't what you'd expect. When we went online, you'd think that people were cheating on tests or collaborating on tests. There was an uptick in people using cheating online resources, and I was trying to figure out why. For the students I talked to it was mental health combined with too much at the end, too much going on, being too overwhelmed. We were dealing with students who were not only worried about things that are happening at school, but their loved ones. We had so many students who experienced the loss of a loved one, parents, grandparents. We had students caring for loved ones who may have had other health issues. We have students who have their own medical issues, who struggled with some of that. COVID impacted the mental health of our students in a variety of ways

However, even if you have mental health issues, you still have to conform to the code of conduct or it's not fair to the other students. So I asked the students, "Did you talk to the instructor?" I found most instructors through this whole COVID period have been incredibly flexible and willing to work with students, and students sometimes are afraid to ask for that. So I would try to encourage students, you've got to look at some alternatives here.

Buzz Bares, 2022

Associate Dean of Students

Member, Emergency Operations Committee



SOMEDAY
YOU WILL FIND
THIS CARD IN A
DRAWER...



I didn't expect to fall in love during a pandemic on a farm in Minecraft, but I did. I had just graduated high school in Oshkosh, turned 18, and I was working and going to school. I had just come out of a relationship that didn't really work out, and dating was out of the question especially in the time of COVID. I had officially considered myself done with guys, romantically.

During my senior year, before COVID, my best friend Dylan and I hung out a lot. We played video games and had even planned to go to prom as friends. When the pandemic hit, we were sent home and told to shelter in place. Later into quarantine, Dylan invited me to play video games with him and a group of about five-six friends he'd known online for years, and that's how I met Ian.

Our group of friends consisted of people who lived in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Sweden and California. We were all single. We played a lot of different video games and talked in group voice calls – about relationships, the good and the bad – just to kill time and entertain ourselves until 3 in the morning. We mostly played Minecraft—a survival-based, community-building sandbox game. We were all in our own silos, creating a community in this digital world. We all took different roles in the game.

Sam was the armor and weaponsmith, Dave and Jade were the builders, Dylan was the explorer, Trevor was the miner, and because Ian and I shared a common goal of farming and crafting, we decided to just merge our bases and work together. After two months, we finally decided to venture off the farm and onto Instagram where we finally saw each other's faces for the first time. I remember thinking, "Wow! He's hot!"

One night, I was driving home from a friend's house really late at night. Ian insisted on talking to me on the phone, so that he could make sure I was awake and safe...and we fell in love. Dylan takes full credit for bringing Ian and me together.

But, we had two very big problems. He lived 1,700 miles away in California, and we were in a global pandemic. In a time when people all over the world felt disconnected in these uncertain times, I never expected to find love and strong friendships through an internet connection.

Ian and I traveled back and forth a few times. He came to see me twice during my freshman year at UW Oshkosh. All of our classes were still online, making it a lot easier for Ian and I to plan when he could come visit. I flew for the last time to California in August of 2021 and took on a 2,000-mile road trip to move him to Wisconsin so we could finally be together. Two years later, we still play Minecraft with the group. Now when we do play, Ian and I sit on the couch side-by-side. Out of this pandemic, we not only grew our digital farm, we also grew something beautiful in real life.

Olivia Basiliere, 2022

Social Work major



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College of Nursing

Jada
Student Nurse
College of Nursing

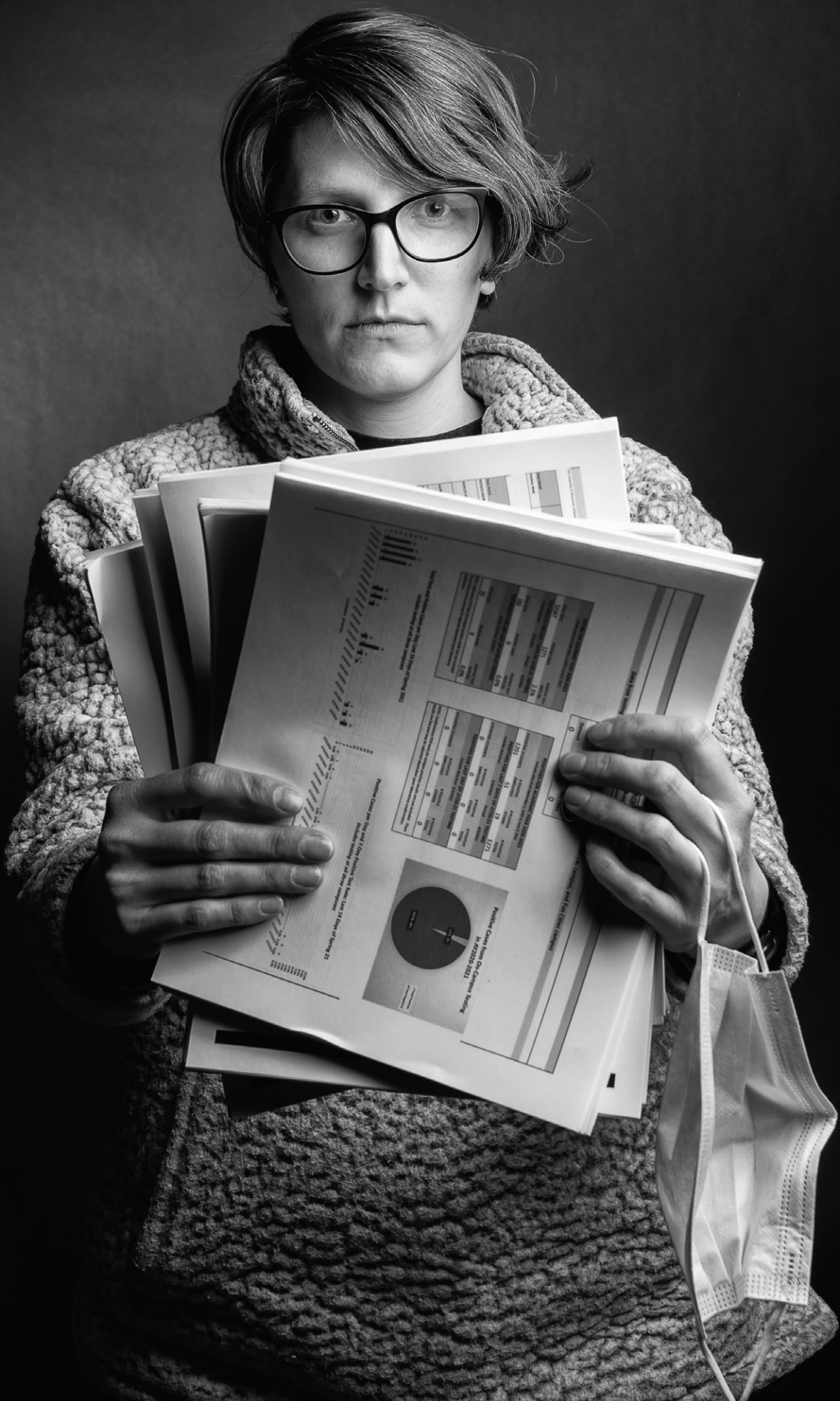
MY PRONOUNS:
**SHE, HER,
HERS**

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I'm the health advocate in South Scott Hall. I like to call myself the CVS of the dorm, where students can come to me for Band-Aids, Tylenol and condoms. But since COVID, I had to be the mask police in the dorm. I was the one who had to write them up. The rules were clearly stated. You just have to wear them in the hallways, in the common areas. You don't have to wear them in your own room, and the students just could not get that through their heads. I'm a nursing student. The students tell me, "Oh, I hate wearing a mask. It's uncomfortable," whatever. And as a health care worker, my empathy for them grew thin. I had to wear an N95 mask for 12 hours. I was like, "No, just wear your mask, please." I have a very immunocompromised mother with Stage IV kidney disease and Type 2 diabetes. When the school sent us home in March of 2020, I was working as a CNA in a community-based residence facility. I work with adults with Down syndrome, dissociative identity disorder, Alzheimer's, dementia, depression, anxiety. I wanted to be there because I was a familiar face. They were shut down and no visitors were allowed, so I was their only visitor for a very long time. I had been taking care of a lot of them for over a year so I just wanted to be there for them. But it was also very scary because I did not want to contract it myself, of course, and the thought of giving my mother COVID was just terrifying. I remember my stepdad was working while my mom was not. My stepdad and I would take off the clothes we were wearing in the garage, because we have a garage that goes into the house. We'd leave them there for a week, to quarantine our clothes, just in case something got on them. What I've learned about myself through all this is that I do not need to keep people in my life that keep arguing about certain things, especially with the whole conversation of masks or no masks or vaccines or no vaccines. I have blocked and unfriended and just gotten rid of so many people in my life, that I'm like, "I don't want you in my life. If you're going to argue about something like this, if you don't care about humanity, if you don't care about what I do as a health care worker, I don't need you."

Jada Berg, 2021

Nursing major; graduated in May 2022



I am such a data nerd. When we decided we were bringing people back to campus, we had to figure out what do we need to measure? What do we need to keep track of to be able to tell where we're at? We had to find a way to help everyone stay safe and try to contain outbreaks before they happen. And that's the birth of the spreadsheet, what we call "the dashboard" for our COVID response. It has had data from our testing and vaccine centers, dorms, Athletics, the counties our campuses are in, the state. This spreadsheet has so many columns. It keeps growing and changing. I take in all the data and synthesize it into something easier to digest, a summary page, graphs, quick facts, but the spreadsheet has all the background data if we need it. I was doing reports every time the EOC met to start with. For a while we were meeting every day for three hours. When the U.S. Surgeon General came to campus to check out our community testing center at Culver Family Welcome Center, Chief Leibold, our EOC chair, said to me in passing, "Good job on the data, Michelle," and I thought he was giving me crap because I hadn't sent him the updated data yet that day. He said, "No, really, we had the surgeon general look at it this morning. He was impressed." I kind of wanted to meet him and say, "Yeah, that was me," but I didn't. I'm not that kind of person. But it was still cool.

Michelle Bogden Muetzel, 2022

Risk Manager

Member, Emergency Operations Committee



I handle the Chancellor's calendar. I could see a change right away. All of the meetings went virtual and his meetings with outside entities in the community pretty much just stopped because people don't really know how to deal with the pandemic yet. I was doing quite a bit with the COVID hotline that was set up at the University. It was heart-wrenching to talk to some of these people. I got to know some elderly people that would call me every day and ask, "Is the vaccine ready? Where can I go to get it?" This was early on when we had only a few spots for people to get vaccines and those posts would fill up very quickly. We had different options to give them, but a lot of them were very scared and very frustrated.

Malissa Bonlender, 2022

Executive Assistant, Office of the Chancellor

The biggest thing is just recognizing that students are coming in with greater burdens because of this pandemic, especially since we're still in it. And this burden is only intensified by the numerous other social injustices that have continued to impact marginalized communities; we are very much still in that as well.

Teysha Bowser, 2022

Assistant Professor, Counseling and Human Services





I'm kind of a control freak so when I first heard about the pandemic I started preparing. It sounds so bizarre looking back now, but I was like, I need to protect my family, so I started hoarding food, but not crazy hoarding. I'd think the next time we go to Costco, I'm just going to get an extra thing, a pancake mix, a just-add-water pancake mix, and maybe I'll just get an extra thing of pasta. Then the news started coming, and the virus was getting worse and hitting different countries. It's only a matter of time before it gets here. And who knows what's going to happen? Worst case scenario, we'd have lots of extra pancakes.

At work I was the only instructional designer in March of 2020. The provost contacted me and another person and told us to drop everything and to start preparing for the University to go fully online. We started working on a crash course in teaching online. I worked with our Canvas administrator and a couple other people trying to figure out the next steps. What do we need? What are the absolute essentials? What programming do we need to offer? Not all of our instructors are super tech savvy. How do we teach them? We usually recommend six months to plan to take a previously face-to-face course to convert it to online. That's working with one individual instructor. All of the sudden, we had all the instructors, and we did not have six months. We had two weeks.

Sarah Bradway, 2022

Instructional Designer



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AT THE HELM

Meeting of the Minds

Andrew “Andy” Leavitt did his best to pay attention to the student scholars at the Research in the Rotunda on March 11, 2020. As the Chancellor of the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, he usually enjoys the annual showcase of student excellence in the state’s Capital. But this time, the atmosphere in the second floor of the stately building was heavy with uneasiness. As he and chancellors from other UW System institutions wend their way through the student research exhibits, they’d sometimes break off into small pods to talk about the mysterious and deadly virus that had reached the shores of the United States and, inevitably, was coming for the Midwest.

“The topic of all of the chancellors’ minds along with the UW System President Ray Cross was “what do we do, who’s going to do what, and when?” There was always a tendency to see what Madison was going to do first. Once it came out during that event that Madison was going to close for one week and reopen online, the rest of us scattered. Almost everyone was back in their cars and headed home.”

A Monumental Decision

The next day on March 12, Leavitt sent a campus-wide email telling students and staff that classes would be canceled for the following week, the week before spring break. Courses would then resume remotely after the two-week break through alternative methods, meaning no in-person instruction. UW Oshkosh, located about three hours north of Chicago and 90 minutes from Madison, has more than 13,000 students and 1,500 employees over three campuses. It has an annual budget of about \$240 million. Leavitt is the decider of what happens at Wisconsin’s third largest university. As chancellor, he is the University’s CEO, the top dog.

“Everything that happens here is a part of my responsibility. I’m responsible for the curriculum, the fiscal affairs, student well being, student safety, all of the faculty and staff, so I have total responsibility over all aspects of the university. As the decider, you have to have a certain degree of confidence. There have been decisions I’ve made here that have gone well, and there have been a few that have gone off the rails.”

On any given day, the chancellor will make simple decisions such as which campus event to attend - a play or a research event or a basketball game. He’ll also make difficult ones such as canceling commencement because of bad weather, which Leavitt actually did in 2016. That unpopular decision spurred many angry calls and emails from students and parents. For a while, the Chancellor was known as the CANCELLOR.

But what happens to the decision-maker when a global pandemic strikes? Students and staff were told to go home, stay safe and stay away from campus. However, you can’t just close the campus to everyone. There were students who couldn’t go home, international students who couldn’t travel, professors doing research in labs, and the list goes on. So who had to stay and work in person on campus during a global pandemic? Who was deemed essential?

“The first person who was not essential was me, so I immediately went home. I wanted to serve as an example, because we needed people to go home for the safety of our campus. Between our police department, the custodial staff and facilities staff, we may have had 25 to 30 individuals on our campus from March through June. There was a very, very small number of people, and that was mainly just to keep the mechanicals running.”

Leavitt wanted people to shelter in place to slow the spread of the virus. This was back in the early days of the pandemic when the idea of flattening the curve was possible. He held Zoom meetings with his Cabinet members, who were all sent home. His living room became his office, and his dog Ellie became a popular recurring character in his video meetings. Leavitt was well aware that the University needed people to work in person to keep the campuses running. These essential workers included the custodial staff, who already had a tough job of cleaning up after students and staff, who had left suddenly. There were fridges that needed to be cleaned out and trash left behind. That was daunting enough. However, the custodial staff also had to prepare one of the residence halls to be used as a potential overflow facility for COVID patients from the community. That overflow never happened, but in the early days of the pandemic, the sense of urgency, the sense of wanting to do something, was there. Leavitt and his wife Karen, who is a registered nurse in Oshkosh, pitched in. They were assigned to clean 30 rooms in two wings. Wearing gloves and masks, they pulled out dressers and dorm fridges. They wiped down every surface and vacuumed.

“My wife, Karen, and I worked a day helping sanitize rooms in Scott Hall. It was very physical work to move the furniture around, which is not easy, simply because it all seemed to be made out of steel. We did that because I wanted



Chancellor Andrew Leavitt at the Research in the Rotunda in March 2020, the last one before COVID closed in-person instruction at the UW System schools.



to show the custodians that what they did mattered, and that it was important to the university as well as the community. When I do these kinds of acts, they are meant to be symbolic of my gratitude for what people have done during COVID. It's not in any shape or form to suggest that somehow I was doing the same work as they were. The custodians here are in many ways the unsung heroes of the pandemic in that they continued to work, and continued to follow through on what they had to do, under very uncertain conditions at the time."

In April of 2020, Leavitt had asked then-University Chief of Police Kurt Leibold to put together a team of people to develop and implement a plan that would allow students, faculty and staff to return to campus safely in the Fall of 2020. Leibold, with the assistance of Kimberly Langolf and Elizabeth Hartman, asked more than two dozen people across campus to join the Emergency Operations Committee (EOC) and its subsequent off-shoot, the Recovery Task Force (RTF). At that time, Langolf was the Director of Risk and Sponsored Programs, and Hartman was the Executive Director of the Office of Economic Development. On May 15, 2020, the chancellor charged the Recovery Task Force to develop a comprehensive plan to safely offer instruction for the Fall 2020 semester by June 1.

The Financial Strain of COVID

Before the pandemic, Leavitt's plate was already full of challenges that the institution as a whole faced. The University, as with many campuses nationwide, has endured declining enrollment for more than six years. These trends put a financial strain on the institution, which COVID made worse. Students were not living on campus, which meant money from housing, meal plans, and other student expenses stopped flowing in at a time the campus was already struggling. The University braced itself for a projected 12 percent decrease in enrollment from Spring of 2020 to the Fall semester.

To counter the revenue shortfall, Leavitt rolled out two sets of furloughs or temporary leaves of absence for staff, intermittent and continuous. Those put on

continuous furlough didn't work nor receive any paychecks for the allotted time. (However, they were able to apply for unemployment benefits from the state and federal level that were offered because of COVID.) Staff on intermittent furloughs were required to take two days off of work each month, resulting in a 10 percent pay cut. Leavitt and members of his cabinet subjected themselves to a 15 percent pay cut during the furlough period. With the money saved from the furloughs and a smaller than expected decline in enrollment for Fall 2020 (from 12 percent to 7 percent), the University was able to weather the financial storm that COVID brought. The University then received \$40 million of federal COVID relief funds over the next year from both the Trump and Biden administrations. Half was redirected towards students through Higher Education Emergency Relief Funds (HEERF). The other \$20 million was set aside for the University for its COVID response through 2026.

"One of the most difficult decisions I've ever made was to order the furloughs. You are creating a very high level of stress and uncertainty in someone else's life and we didn't know what would happen or when people would come back. The first furloughs ran from May 5 of 2020 through the summer, and during that time period I made a decision to extend some furloughs to the 31st of December. We pulled the people who were continuously furloughed back into their jobs in the month of August, because we needed to be at full force for the students. To my knowledge, we didn't lose a single employee who was continuously furloughed. They all came back which I was grateful for, and I'm proud to say that of the schools that went on furlough, we were the only ones who ended our furloughs early. We ended them in December of 2020 when other schools took their furloughs through the following Spring semester."



Chancellor Leavitt with UW System President and former Gov. Tommy Thompson and U.S. Surgeon General Jerome Adams visiting the COVID-19 surge testing site at Culver Family Welcome Center in November 2020.

Bringing Students Back

During a Zoom meeting in the Summer of 2020 with Leavitt and other UW chancellors, then-interim UW System President Tommy Thompson declared that all UW system institutions will be open for students to return in person for the Fall 2020 semester. Through his connections as a former Wisconsin governor who served as U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services under President George W. Bush, Thompson was able to secure COVID tests for UW institutions to help mitigate the virus once the students returned to campus. Thompson made the rapid antigen tests available to UW institutions. Antigen tests were faster and cheaper, but not as accurate as the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests. Some chancellors expressed concerns about the antigen tests, citing news reports of their unreliability. UW Madison turned down the antigen tests and operated their own PCR testing centers. Leavitt, who has a Ph.D. in chemistry, could see the potential in using the test.

“I felt that whatever the risks were, it would be worth it. At that point, we were getting a sense of the incredible toll on mental health and on learning that was occurring. More was known about COVID, so I felt we could do a better job of taking care of the students than they could if they were just randomly scattered about in towns across the state. Governor Thompson made the announcement that we will be open to students, and I certainly agreed with it. A safe and successful return to campus was going to be predicated on testing. So we were one of the first ones who adopted rapid antigen testing where students were tested multiple times per week.”



Chancellor Leavitt staffing the front desk of the designated COVID dorm September 19, 2020.



When it came to the campus response to COVID, the Emergency Operations Committee was used to make recommendations to Leavitt for his final decisions. The EOC formed a Titans Return Plan, which outlined the health and safety measures that UWO would need to make a safe return. The initial plan required everyone to wear a mask, social distance, and for courses to be offered both online and in person. It allowed for students and staff to safely navigate the campus while continuing on with higher education.

Leavitt's decision to bring the students back in person was met with a spectrum of support, trepidation and outright condemnation. A Sept. 9, 2020 opinion piece by UWO student Joseph Schulz, the managing editor of the Advance-Titan, the independent student newspapers of the UW Oshkosh campuses, called the Titans Return Plan "a sham" and strongly rebuked Leavitt for putting the University's financial problems ahead of students' health. A few months later on Dec. 10, 2020, Schulz wrote an open letter of apology in the Advance-Titan with the headline: "Dear Chancellor Leavitt, I was wrong."

In preparation for the students' return, the University converted the gymnasium in Albee Hall into a COVID testing center. Students in residence halls were tested weekly. Those who tested positive or were in close contact with someone who did were immediately sent to either quarantine or isolation in a residence hall designated specifically for those cases. In November, UWO opened a new COVID-19 testing center at Culver Family Welcome Center (CFWC) with new rapid antigen tests that provide results in 15 minutes to help combat the surge of cases in the region. UW Oshkosh was later recognized by the CDC and Department of Health and Human Services at the federal level for its exemplary work with the mixed use of PCR and rapid antigen tests. The U.S. Surgeon General, Jerome Adams, visited the testing center Nov. 6, 2020, to recognize the University's early efforts to monitor the spread of COVID.

In the Classroom

Pre-COVID, 80 percent of classes were in person and the rest were held online. Fall of 2020, classes were offered in person, online or a mix of the two. Leavitt understood that it was a scary and uncertain time for both students and staff. What did Leavitt do to show his confidence in the COVID-safety protocols that the University had in place? He decided to teach a chemistry lab in person that fall. He did not tout his leadership role to the students, many of whom were first-year students and had no idea what a chancellor is or does.

“Students don’t necessarily know who the chancellor is, nor do they care. I certainly remember my undergraduate experience. The only time I ever saw the university president was at commencement and that was from afar and with a certain degree of hostility because he seemed to talk and talk and talk at the commencement ceremony. What does it mean to teach a lab? It means you’re in physical contact with the students in the same room because you’re providing instruction and supervision in close proximity. Many staff members had reservations about teaching in person. I felt that it was the least I could do to demonstrate some level of camaraderie or empathy for a faculty or staff member who might be teaching a much heavier load than I would. No one was forced to teach in person, but many professors volunteered and never complained, at least to me, about the way we did things. That’s a testament to the faculty, they were willing to go in and ready to accept the risk. We didn’t have the vaccine at that point and 3,000 people a day in the United States were dying of COVID, and they were the age of many of our faculty and staff. We had faculty who were quite frankly terrified about going back in. I had to convince people to come back. We had to convince students that it was safe. We had to back it up. You can’t just do this and then have it all fall apart.”



Move-in day September 2021.

The University conducted roughly 2,250 tests per week that fall semester with an overall positive test rate of 4 percent. However, during the early days of the students returning to campus, the number of positive cases rose dramatically from one to two a day to more than 100 cases. Things were looking grim for UW Oshkosh as other UW System schools began locking down dorms for one or two weeks at a time to reduce the spread of COVID.

"I remember getting a call from President Thompson who said, "Hey man, what the hell is going on over there? Do we need to shut down?" I said, "Well, we have a bit of a spike here, but no I don't think that's the way to handle it." I had supreme confidence in our return-to-work plan. We were innovators in how we tested and surveyed the University, and the EOC and I agreed we could manage it. But when the positive rate is through the roof, it's like a tidal wave that's crashing in on you and you second-guess yourself. I never considered closing, but wow, there were some white-knuckle days. But it could have gone the other way. God forbid, what if people died, started dying, and then we would have had deaths that occurred on campus that were a direct result of decisions that I had made. That was always in the back of my mind. That's the darker context of decision-making, that something could happen like that. It didn't, and I'm not to blame for or to take credit for that. I think we had some very good policies and procedures and practices in place that would have helped mitigate or prevent that."

Students who tested positive and their close student contacts were placed in Webster Hall, a residence facility designated as the "Covid Dorm." They would isolate and quarantine for 10-14 days. Some students showed no symptoms; others felt pretty crummy. Now remember, these are college students, who were told to stay in their rooms, by themselves. There were people who made sure that the students had food and other amenities, but there wasn't really anyone there, at the front desk, on site. That meant some students who were tired of being cooped up just left to take a walk or had visitors in their rooms. In the regular dorms, student workers often staff the front desk to answer questions about mail or handle late-night pizza delivery. But not at "the COVID dorm," because, frankly, it's full of sick people. Leavitt visited the dorm a few times and realized there was a problem.

"You got to remember we were all making this up as we went. Nothing like this ever happened. We were quarantining and isolating people on our own campus and how do you take care of people? There were custodians going in and out of that facility cleaning, but they were wearing full environmental suits and you know so that was scary to look walking in like that. What that facility needed was a concierge. They needed someone that was going to be in the front desk of the place there to answer students' concerns, also, quite frankly, to monitor the front door. There weren't a lot of students who wanted to volunteer to go work in the COVID dorm. I went down there and spent three days manning the front desk. Most of the students who walked in had no idea who I was. It did have the desired effect that there were people that were like, "What the hell is the chancellor doing there?" One of my vice chancellors was upset because he didn't want to see me contract COVID, certainly not unnecessarily."

The Chancellor worked the front desk at the COVID dorm 4 to 6 hours on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. He wore an N95 mask. There was a Plexiglass partition between him and the students. He greeted them and asked how they were feeling. By Monday, student workers showed up to take over the front desk duties. His goal to have an on-site presence was met. Before the semester ended, Gruenhagen Hall became the COVID dorm. That facility had a 24-hour front desk staff.

"If I teach a class or man a desk, to a certain extent that is performative, but it does come from a place of real gratitude in my heart for the work our community put in.



It's about creating the kind of culture that you know will move the university forward. You want to show people that you appreciate what they do on a daily basis. Most of the time, that means simply showing up and saying thank you, but there are rare occasions when it's better to do something a little bit beyond that to demonstrate that you really do care."

The Chancellor did pay a visit to the new COVID Dorm around the holidays in December 2020. While most students went back home, about a dozen were either quarantining or isolating over the holidays. Leavitt felt badly about this and decided to bring them some holiday cheer. He borrowed a Santa suit from a staff member. He wore the hat and the top. He drew the line at the red matching pants. With the help of a couple of staff members, Leavitt went to the campus bookstore and, using his own money, bought gifts to bring to those in the COVID dorm.

"This was a couple days before Christmas. We went door to door with a pretty funny range of reactions from the students from just absolute delight to "Why are you bothering me right now? I don't feel well."

Serving the Community

In the Spring of 2021, classes began again both in-person and online. Masks were still required on campus. The University has managed to avoid major outbreaks of COVID-19 on campus. Leavitt was feeling cautiously optimistic about how the campus has responded to the pandemic. Then he got an offer from UW Systems President Tommy Thompson that he couldn't refuse.

"It was the Department of Health and Human Services at the federal level, who approached Tommy Thompson. They said, "If we gave you money, would you open public vaccination centers?" President Thompson said, "Of course." He

wanted to know who was interested in doing that. I'm always the guy in the front row who's going to volunteer for anything. Any innovation that we did with COVID in the UW system, generally speaking, Oshkosh was up front."

By late February, UWO opened up its community vaccination site at the Culver Family Welcome Center and began vaccinating those in Phase 1a, which includes health care workers, essential workers and those 65 and over. The on-campus site complemented Winnebago County's community testing and vaccination center.

Behind the scenes, Leavitt helped secure a partnership with Aurora Medical Center in Oshkosh to administer the vaccines. He is friends and was neighbors at the time with John Newman, the president of the hospital.

Moving Forward with COVID

While the external validation from the CDC and for former U.S. Surgeon General was a nice pat-on-the-back for the members of the EOC and others who worked tirelessly on the campus COVID response, Leavitt gives much credit to the students' and staffs' willingness to adapt in a time of such uncertainty. Through aggressive testing and contact tracing, UWO was able to keep its positive rates down. On Sept. 30, 2022, more than two years after the University closed its campus for in-person instruction, the University closed its testing and vaccination center. Center staff administered 106,971 COVID tests and provided more than 4,500 vaccinations. The EOC, which first met in January of 2020, ended its pandemic-related meetings at this point, but is continuously on call should there be another emergency at the University. Students can still get tested for COVID at the Student Health Center. The mask mandate is long gone, but some continue to wear face coverings to classes, which are full of lively discussions. Students gather in dining halls and sporting events. Leavitt is holding more in-person meetings, but the Zoom Town Halls that he held during the past couple of years will continue because of their popularity among the staff and faculty. Looking back, Leavitt knows he made some really hard decisions but he is humbled by the resiliency of the University community.

"We have a pretty amazing capacity to function under difficult times and to use initiative and curiosity to solve problems in real time. The amount of change to higher education that happened during this period would not have occurred over 100 years if we didn't have the unfortunate stimulus of a pandemic. We adapted in many different ways because we had to. We all knew we had to do something that was otherwise impossible, but we did it. People might argue we did it with varying degrees of success, but it worked well enough. The rate of change of anything in higher education is usually about 30 years, but we showed we could do it in two weeks. UW Oshkosh has been around 150 years, and it's going to be running for 150 more. I can't screw it up that bad. You just need to be navigated by what you think is right. You have to listen to expertise while being prudent. I don't think you should be reckless or too innovative, but it's about the institution itself in the end. You want to make sure that it endures, and I know now that UW Oshkosh will endure."



Chancellor Leavitt with U.S. Surgeon General Jerome Adams, Gov. Tony Evers and UW System President and former Gov. Tommy Thompson at the vaccine center tour February 2021.

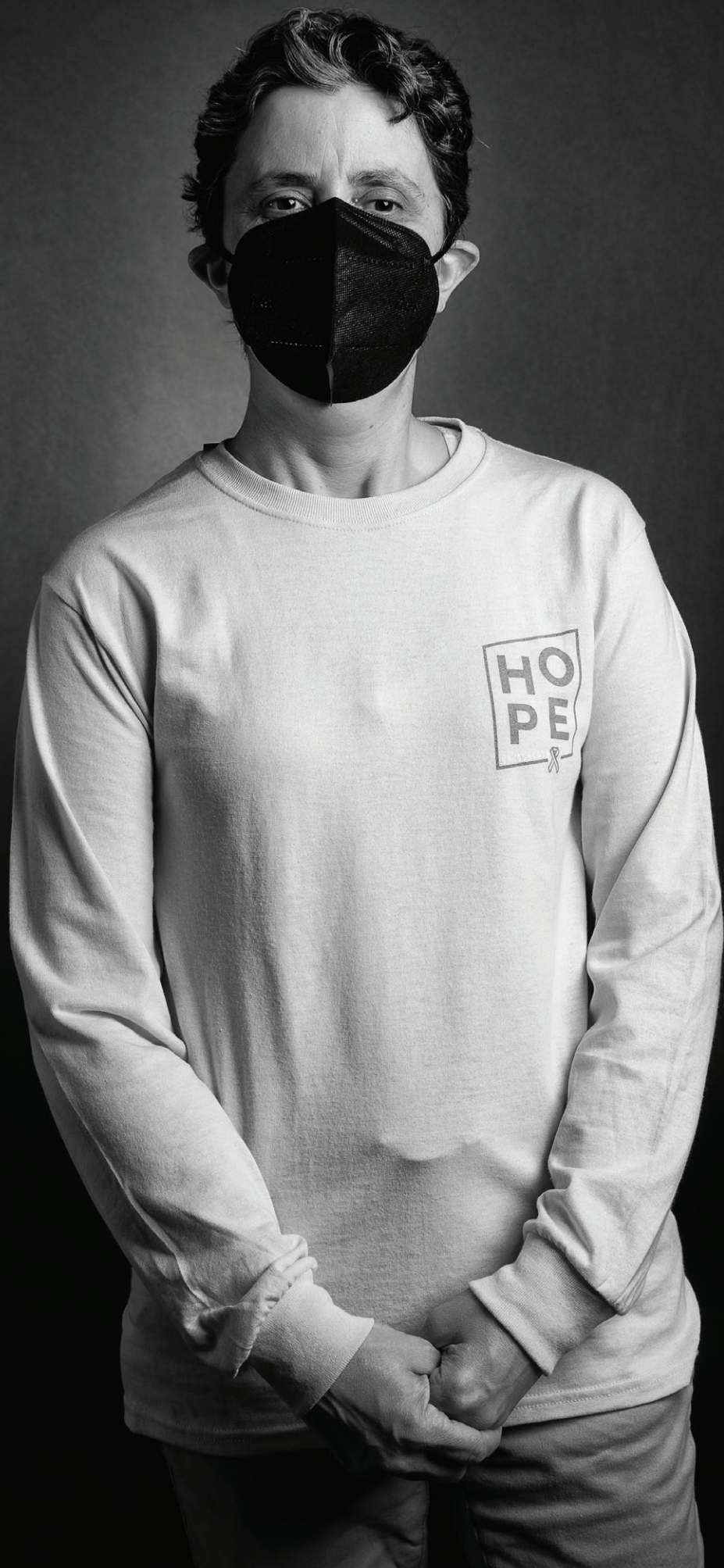


In the early days of the pandemic, I wrote daily communications to staff and students. I would do a version for parents because parents had a lot of questions and a lot of concerns, and students don't always check their emails. It's been over two years, so I could have written more than a thousand of these communications. I was an adrenaline junkie when I worked in the newspaper. I did a lot of hard news, breaking news, that kind of thing. So responding in this way was for me a lot like going back to that and really being excited and feeling needed.

Peggy Breister, 2022

Chief Communications Officer

Member, Emergency Operations Committee



It was very hard getting students to feel connected, because at the point when everything went virtual, the last thing that students want to do at night is to log on for another virtual program. For our Titan Nights, which takes place the first week of the semester, we normally have 10 or 12 different activities. That fall of 2020, we had an outdoor scavenger hunt with teams of two, where they had to take photos. We had an outdoor movie, where we were calculating how many people we could put on the Rec Plex field and keep them six feet apart. We came up with the blanket standard. Everyone brings a blanket, and one human per blanket. Much of the gratification that we get in the work that we do comes in seeing people connecting at our events or hearing Reeve Union Board was what kept me in college. And when you don't get that gratification, and you're working three times as hard to make things happen, it's just been challenging.

In the spring of 2021, the Reeve Union Board students said, "We want Bye Gosh Fest to happen." The RUB advisor and I looked at each other and we're like, this is not happening. Bye Gosh Fest is an end-of-the year concert and festival. So typically we have an opening artist, a mid-level artist, and then a bigger named artist. In the past, we've had 3OH!3, we've had Jesse McCartney. So B.o.B was scheduled for March of 2020. Depending on the artist, we generally have between 2,000 and 4,000 people there, standing centimeters apart. The students said, "We want it to happen." And so the advisor and I said, "Let's talk about how we can do it safely." And they did. They pulled it off. We had a virtual concert, but we had a lot of outside activities, and I remember Interim Vice Chancellor Art Munin stopped by and he said, "It really feels like campus again."

Missy Burgess, 2022

Associate Director for Student Involvement, Reeve Union
Member, Emergency Operations Committee



Polk Library was closed for about five months to in-person visitors. My team and I had to do whatever we could with our electronic resources and make sure the students could still do their research papers and the faculty could still do their work. We had to adapt. We extended due dates so people didn't have to worry about "Oh, this is due back on June 1, how am I going to get this to the library when I am not supposed to go anywhere." We did curbside pickup, which was something I took on primarily. I intercepted all the requests, pulled most of those materials and scheduled the appointments for pickups. That was a big undertaking.

In the early days of the pandemic, the library administrative team members were the only ones coming into the library. We would take turns coming in to do a walkthrough of the building to make sure there were no problems, like a catastrophic water leak. We have a lot of irreplaceable collections. The very first time was quite an experience. It felt very weird to be in the building alone with no one around. I'm very familiar with the library, I know it inside and out and I could walk around blindfolded. It felt like I was in a post-apocalyptic horror movie. There was zero activity, parking lots were empty, nobody was walking around. There were signs on all the doors of all the buildings on campus that had sanitization protocols. The campus was really shut down, and if anybody was here, you didn't see them.

Crystal Buss, 2022

Head of Access Services at Polk Library



I remember we had Honors College graduation that Spring of 2020. We had it online. So how do we do an online graduation? What is this going to look like? When you graduate from the Honors College, you earn the Honors Medallion, so I said to every one of the graduates, I need you to find somebody at home who can award you the Honors Medallion. We shipped between 65 and 80 Honors Medallions out to their homes. So it's Honors College graduation day, and I'm in my basement. I had to go back to campus because I had to grab our big Honors College banner, and I hung it on the wall in my basement. Then I placed the laptop in front of me with the banner behind me. I called the name of each graduate and read a little blurb about their accomplishments at UW Oshkosh. After the blurb, the graduate would say who was awarding them the Medallion; they would say, "Thank you, Dr. Carlin. My mother/father/aunt/grandfather/whoever will now award me my Honors Medallion." As soon as that happened, every mic would go on and everybody would cheer. It was chaotic, but that was another major event we didn't want to say was canceled. These students have worked so hard for a number of years. They maintain high grades and are very engaged. We wanted to make sure they had an Honors College Graduation where they could be awarded that coveted Honors Medallion they had worked so hard for. And we pulled it off. There were a lot of laughs, a few tears, but we made it happen.

Laurence Carlin, 2022
Dean, Honors College

Going back to how we were pre-COVID, I don't think that'll ever happen again until decades from now.

Erick Carranza, 2021

Criminal Justice major; graduated in May 2021





I've had COVID four times. I got COVID way back in March of 2020 when people started finding out schools were shutting down. I was the 17th case in the state of Wisconsin. Then I got it again in my first week of school as a freshman, and then two more times. I have a very irrational fear of needles. I'm sure a lot of people have the same thing, but I just pass out when I get shots. I'm that person who has to get seat-belted into a chair so I've been avoiding getting the vaccine for so long.

Nikki Censky, 2021

Business major



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I was born in Thailand in the refugee camp called Wat Tham Krabok where the Hmong community gathered to live together due to the secret war. My parents did not have the chance of going to school due to their surrounding environment in Laos and Thailand. I've been in the United States for about 16 years now, and it is quite amazing that my family and I started with a straw house and grew into a solidly built house that we own today. Going to college was always an encouragement in my home and graduating with a bachelor's and continuing to graduate school has always been a goal for me since I was young.

I was a senior at Appleton West High School excited for graduation and to walk the stage but due to COVID, that was canceled, and I received my diploma in the mail instead. Prom was canceled and it felt like I just got kicked out of high school because I never had the chance to say goodbye. I started college as a freshman feeling so lost because everything was done virtually, the classes, orientation, and group meetings.

I passed my CNA state test right before COVID hit while I was still working as a caregiver at an assisted living facility in Appleton, Wisconsin. The facility was low on supplies so anytime that they could get their hands on a load of things, the facility went out of their way to get those supplies because it is not wanted but needed. We were only wearing gowns and full PPE for positive COVID rooms to make sure that we had enough supplies to last. The facility was closed so no visitors were allowed and that affected all of our residents because they can't even be with their families during these hard times. We were their friends, families, and all they had. To the employee, it's just a workplace but to the residents, it's their home, their shelter, and where they feel safe.

I was very excited to go to college until I was in college, which was not as exciting as I thought it would be. I wanted to make new friends and build that community I once had but I could not find it because of the loss of connections. I was supposed to live in dorms but due to COVID, my family decided that I should stay home for the year. Today, I still struggle to maintain college because of having to start online virtually and now fully in-person classes. You would think that college classes are like high school classes where you can go from one class to the other, but there is a lot of gap in between classes sometimes and that was difficult for me because I like to finish my classes one by one with no gap. Those gaps distract me and I can't manage my time.

COVID stole my graduation, canceled my senior prom, and ruined the start of my freshman year in college, but COVID also has shown me how precious time is by working as a CNA to be the heart of my residents.

Malida Chang, 2022

Nursing major



As campus was opening back up to in-person classes in the fall of 2020, the orchestra did so in a very large space. We did not allow any aerosol-producing instrumentalists into the orchestra. We just had strings and percussion perform distanced from one another. Everyone wore a mask. We all had our own stands at the time, so there was no touching of the same papers or moving of chairs. I was responsible for doing all of that moving and setting up myself, and the students simply came and went. When they came in, they had to be in a certain single file line and exit in a certain single file line, go down and up the hallway in a certain direction while not going past other people. I don't think anyone contracted COVID in the orchestra that entire year, if I'm not mistaken.

Although we could not perform for a live audience, we still worked hard to share all that music provides. What we did was to record music, at a clip of about one song per week—an astonishing rate. Our recordings were paired with video to add additional meaning, often juxtaposing intent in a unique way. Through video and music we spoke to love, equality, and freedom, to name but a few. And these videos were shared with the greater public. I was proud that the orchestra met and was live, in person. I think we were the only orchestra in the state of Wisconsin that was meeting live in person at that time because I chose to limit it to strings only and percussion. And I'm proud that we did it safely.

Dylan Chmura-Moore, 2022

Associate Professor, Music



Right before the pandemic, I worked in our device support area, which primarily assisted faculty and staff members with the devices they use in their offices. We had a lot of physical contact with staff before COVID—a lot of office visits. But when COVID hit, I knew all of that was going to change, and I knew there was going to be a lot expected of us in IT to help everyone transition into this new way of working. At that point we had six student workers and maybe six other full-time staff. Quickly, we were cut short. For two weeks, we weren't able to have student workers because of sheer panic. Then half of our full-time staff were furloughed. It was just myself and three others in IT at the University as essential workers, meaning we worked in person on campus. We had to make a plan. We set up a pick-up and drop-off location to help set up devices to take home. There was still the stress of having to keep track of more than 500 pieces of equipment people had taken home to use. We went from 80 percent desktop maintenance to 80 percent laptop maintenance. We were essential, and with us being there and being so accessible during COVID, I think that changed what “essential” meant to the general public. IT always sees IT work as essential, and so it was really a matter of a shift in perspective from the outsider's point of view. Post-COVID people have a lot more respect and understanding for IT than they did before.

Liz Christopher, 2022

IT Lead for User Services and Access Campuses



Before COVID-19, I was a social media and specialist for the University. When the pandemic hit campus, it was my job to help distribute updates from University leadership through social media. I also partnered with the Emergency Operations Committee to create a website that displayed COVID-19 information, statistics and official communication. The website had a form for questions and feedback, which meant I was in charge of responding to hundreds of messages from students, staff, faculty and community members. As the pandemic was still fresh at that time, many of the people reaching out were understandably confused, angry or downright scared. I individually responded to as many messages as possible in an effort to help the University community understand the many changes that were taking place. Most of my days were spent at home, in a makeshift office in my living room, with a small desk loaded with my computer and resources. With help from the Emergency Operations Committee, I ended up creating an online dashboard that displayed the number of daily positive and negative COVID-19 test results as well as other information. This dashboard helped keep the community up to date on any outbreaks on our campuses, reducing the number of individuals who had to come to us with questions and concerns. Every weekday, I took new data from the EOC and used it to update the tables and graphs on the dashboard. It was a lot for me to juggle, especially because my job had changed completely that year. Considering the circumstances, though, I felt a strong sense of accomplishment because I was able to maintain a steady routine to ensure students and staff at UWO had as much information as possible about what the future held for them.

Trevor Clementi, 2022

Digital Marketing Director

Member, Emergency Operations Committee



When COVID hit, what I'm most proud about is how my team responded to it. We had some great out-of-the-box thinking. We had several instructors who lived way out in rural areas and they didn't have broadband Internet access available to them. We were able to reconfigure our wireless networks to point to our parking lots out in front of buildings such as the Nursing Ed building and the High Street parking ramp. We were able to boost up our Wi-Fi range in those areas, and we'd tell the instructors to drive to campus, sit in their car to use their laptops. It was not ideal, but it got the job done.

Mark Clements, 2022

Assistant Vice Chancellor for Information Technology and Chief Information Officer
Member, Emergency Operations Committee



COVID was a bad time, but it was kind of like a reality check. I worked as a CNA in a nursing home in my hometown, which consisted of around 100 beds. At the end of the day, I had rashes on my hands from using such hot water and hand sanitizer non-stop, because I was more terrified to bring COVID to my mom. She's a medical mystery because she has a weird condition where she apparently doesn't have many white blood cells, and we weren't sure how she would react to COVID. That was my biggest fear. COVID broke out a little bit by a little bit at work. It started off with two isolation rooms because we had two positive cases, and then it turned into basically a whole entire COVID unit. Emotionally, that was probably one of the worst things I'd ever experienced, especially at 19 years old to see so many people dying and asking you to sit there and pray with them, hug them, or just be there with them. All of a sudden, I think we lost over 15 people through COVID and I was working every day. I wasn't always on that unit, but I knew who's down there. It was definitely hard to go through that and then lose people at the end of the day. It made me question myself when I went home from work. I cried to my family on most days. However, It was very gratifying to hear different family members tell me how it made their day to see what I was doing for their loved one. I think it actually solidified that I was in the right place in my life.

Jordan Cooper, 2021

Nursing major



“As somebody who works in an institution of higher learning, hearing people say, ‘I don’t know what’s in the vaccine, I’m going to do my own research’ is super frustrating. You don’t know what’s in it, yet, you’re drinking a five-hour energy and taking a handful of Tylenol pills a day. Like, what’s in any of that? And what does ‘doing your own research’ even mean? Do you have a lab?”

Chad Cotti, 2022

Professor, Health Economics

Member, Emergency Operations Committee



I've lost more people to COVID than I want to count. This is a slight exaggeration, but my family is from Macedonia, where COVID hit really hard before it came to the United States. Macedonia is a country in the Balkans. I was born in Tetovo, Macedonia, which has a population of 52,000, which is smaller than the city of Oshkosh with 66,000 people.

My family and I have been living in Berlin, Wis., since I was six years old. I was a senior in high school when COVID hit. My family followed all the COVID safety protocols and managed to avoid the virus in the early days. But my extended family living in Macedonia was not as lucky. There, the virus was spreading like wildfire and a lot of people were getting sick from it.

The first person to die in my family was my great uncle, who had been really close to my Dad. He was taken to a hospital to a COVID wing, where he died by himself with no family members around. But that was not the end of it. The calls from Macedonia kept coming... and coming. More relatives... more deaths. The more calls we got, the less I felt. It came to a point where I was not even surprised anymore. It was my new reality.

No one could grieve properly. Not in Berlin, not in Macedonia where in the early days of COVID, the government took the bodies of people that passed from COVID and buried them. The family was told where the plot was, but was not allowed to visit. The country, essentially, was locked down.

I'm majoring in nursing here at UW Oshkosh, and I really wanted to get the vaccine when it became available. I took a microbiology class, and we were talking about vaccines, so I understood what was in it and how it would affect me. I had no hesitations towards it, but a lot of people did because of the misinformation in the news and online. At first, my parents were scared to get it, but I explained to them what was in the vaccine and how it affected them. My whole family here is vaccinated.

When the vaccines became available in Macedonia, my family and I were relieved. We believed that everyone would have access to the vaccines because that was how it was here in America.

Here, we could go to Walmart, CVS, anywhere, and get it for free without charge. My University had a free vaccine center on campus. That was not the case in Macedonia, where the vaccine rollout was atrocious. People stood in lines for hours to get one.

My grandma went to get her vaccine with my cousin. They waited more than an hour when my cousin noticed someone he knew skipped to the head of the line. They found out that those who could offer bribes to workers could get vaccinated.

Grandma got hers after my cousin slipped some money, about 20 U.S. dollars, in the worker's hand. I got my vaccine at Walmart in Berlin, 15 minutes in and out, and I didn't have to pay a dime.

This showed me how much we take for granted here in America. We do not know how much we have until we see what others go through. Our wealth has made us blind.

Arif Dauti, 2022

Nursing major



When the shutdown occurred, I not only had to figure out remote teaching like everyone else, but I also had to formulate a plan to keep UWO's radio station WRST operating legally. While it could run unattended, there were still functions that required my physical presence like the weekly test of the Emergency Alert System. The first one after the shutdown was on March 16. Radio-TV-Film engineer Bill Kerkhof later devised a remote way to do these tests, but legal paperwork still required me to be on-site on a regular basis. I also had to be on hand in July for the scheduled inspection and painting of the WRST tower on the roof of the building.

WRST is an affiliate of Wisconsin Public Radio and we decided to temporarily carry the network full time since it was offering numerous programs on the pandemic. I had to be in the studio to oversee some programs, and I manually ran the eight nights of the live NPR specials from the political conventions in August.

I was uncomfortable being in a closed campus building, particularly after it had been disinfected. Had my presence been challenged, I had my "Essential Broadcast Personnel" photo ID from the Wisconsin Broadcasters Association and eventually carried documents from Homeland Security and the Federal Communications Commission allowing station access and a copy of the Governor Evers order stating that broadcasters were essential businesses.

Of all my classes, I feared my upper-level news production class would suffer the most, but WRST student leaders taking the course rallied to save the day. Using free software, the WRST station manager devised a way to record phone interviews into a computer audio editor and produced a YouTube tutorial for his classmates. Also, the WRST news director developed a podcast version of the station's weekly newsmagazine "Week in Review" to provide a venue for the reports produced by his fellow students. The first episode had a dozen student-produced reports and a long-form interview with Chancellor Leavitt about the pandemic response on campus. The podcast was distributed through Apple Music and Spotify and hosted on the website of the Advance-Titan. The series garnered a national award in the podcast category from College Broadcasters, Inc. and a statewide one from the Milwaukee Press Club.

I'm proud of how the students adapted to the crisis and of the public service WRST provided to the local community.

Randall Davidson, 2023
Director of Radio Services/WRST
Senior Lecturer, Radio TV Film



do
beautiful things
with your
beautiful life

2020

I got an email on my phone telling me I was picked to be a commencement speaker. I didn't tell anyone for the longest time—not my friends, and not even my family. I just cried all night. I wasn't the greatest student in high school, I struggled with a speech impediment when I was younger, so I dreamed of having the privilege to speak to thousands of people in person.

As a first-generation college graduate, I wanted this so bad. This is the biggest accomplishment of my entire college life, and it's being stripped away from me. I can't even experience it to its full extent. I felt like my dreams were tarnished, and commencement was reduced to a pre-recorded video to watch in our bedrooms. I felt so alone, but it turned out that a friend of mine had also been chosen as the other commencement speaker. What were the odds? We were both hurting, and we mourned the experience together.

Eventually I realized that what happened to us was not the worst thing in the world. The issue was so much bigger than what was going on with us, and the pandemic was beyond our control. I recorded my speech in my living room using my cellphone with a tripod I borrowed from work. In my speech I said, 'My grandmother was right. Don't wish your life away, because soon you'll be wishing for more time. This hit home for me when the pandemic started. As our classes went virtual, businesses shut down. I realized that I wish I had more time. I wish we all took it in a little bit more. I wish we could have held on to our college moments a little bit longer. I wish we could sit in that classroom one last time. This pandemic is a reminder to all of us to live fully in each moment because you never know how quickly it can all change.'

Alexandra Fischer, 2021

Communications major; commencement speaker, May 2020



When I started college in September of 2020, I didn't think that having a roommate would affect my college experience. I can get along with most people, and have no problem striking a conversation. I had been assigned a random roommate based upon the questionnaire that was provided by the housing department through the university. I thought that it would be a quick and easy way to make a life-long best friend. I was very wrong in all the ways possible. I only saw her in the late hours of the night, when she would come back from God knows where. November had come, and all of her belongings had just been moved out. She didn't tell me she was leaving. She just left.

If this is what people called the "college experience," I wanted nothing to do with it. I needed to get out. I was spending every waking moment alone. I was isolated, and had nobody to talk to, to get through my day. Most nights I would FaceTime my mom as I ate dinner. She felt bad that I was all alone. She was angry that there was nothing that she could do to help in this new place that I am supposed to call "home".

I was visibly depressed, and something needed to change. Once the semester had ended in December, I had moved out of the dorms. I needed to go home, where I had the best roommates - my mom, dad, older sisters, and younger brother. My mom would have home-cooked meals on the table, every night.

I was working full time at a sandwich shop, while still enrolled at UWO. I worked alongside people who I liked talking to. They and an online therapist helped me get out of my funk. Through therapy, I was advised to stay connected with people either in person or virtually, exercise and enjoy sunlight when possible.

I came back to campus in the fall of 2021. I moved in with three other girls, and I am finally able to say that I have friends on campus. I am happy to say that Oshkosh is my new home.

Tiffany Gebhard, 2022

Nursing major



We were all sent home to work remotely, and within days, the U.S. government announced we were banning all travel from Europe. My staff and I put in lots of hours with students who were supposed to be traveling and trying to get students back. Thousands of people were all coming from all over Europe, centralizing in these airports milling around trying to get flights because there were no flights. There was not enough space on the planes to bring everybody home.

I did have one student who had literally just arrived abroad. She was going to study in Germany. We were trying to reach the student, and she wasn't responding, so I contacted her emergency contacts in America, and they were standing in the room with her in Germany. Her parents had gone with her to drop her off. Our student was very lucky. She was able to get on a flight within 24 hours and get home. But then if you think about it, all those people then flew to central hubs in the U.S., mingled again with other people coming from all over Europe and then were spread to their hometowns all over the U.S. within a couple of days. It was a horrifying experience for us because we were watching this, thinking, this does not look like the best idea to keep COVID from spreading.

Jenna Graff, 2021

Director, Office of International Education

Member, Recovery Task Force

I work with students and I work with animals.
You can't just walk away when things get rough.

Sara Hagedorn, 2022

Animal Lab manager and Training Coordinator for the Animal Care
and Use Program





Holly Baierl, Paige Bacchi, Tyler Babalola





I was born and raised in Poland. I moved to the U.S. in 2001 when I was 17 and have been living here ever since. I came here two months before 9/11, and I bring this up because that was another moment in my life where my family at the time said, "You now have to come back. You can't stay in the United States because it's so dangerous. There's going to be war." And I remember as a 17-year-old thinking to myself, "I don't feel safe anywhere else in the world." I bring this up because at the beginning of the pandemic, I thought this was a temporary thing. It was serious, but it felt like it's going to be over soon. No one knew what to expect. It just felt like it was one of those things, like, we're going to regain control, so to speak. Obviously, that didn't happen quite that way. The biggest challenge was enrollment, honestly, because 2020 was such a disruptive year for high school seniors. We had enrollment challenges, and by we, I mean higher education. We've been hearing about the enrollment cliff, the demographic changes, all kinds of opinions on how that did or did not affect Wisconsin, but at the end of the day, you know COVID really contributed to further scrutiny over what a college experience is. We had a lot of uncertainty from students who felt "Why would I be coming to campus or this residential experience? Why would I be paying when this experience is going to look different? We had a really high number of students that just took a gap year. And this is not specific to UWO, just in general. The students that took that gap year; many of them have not returned even to this day.

Aggie Hanni, 2022

Associate Vice Chancellor for Enrollment Management.

Member, Emergency Operations Committee



It was kind of personal for me even from the beginning because my great-grandfather died in the Spanish flu pandemic in 1918. My husband and I, early in the pandemic, were worried. We took our son out of school early because he has asthma. We were reading about people with underlying health conditions and asthma being one of them for risk of severe illness. We were wearing masks very early on, we were socially distancing out in public. My husband was pretty much the only one that was going out. I, because of how I am, was looking at the DHS (Wisconsin Department of Health Services) website every single day. What are the case counts? What's the trend? What's the positivity rate? I was reading as much of the research as I could because being informed and educated was a way to help me reduce stress. I had responsibilities to my students, and I didn't want to let them down. But then once we started the Recovery Task Force work, it was, hey, this is something that's really important, and we have to spend some really focused time doing this. We have important responsibilities to the University and the broader community.

Elizabeth Hartman, 2022

Executive Director Office of Economic Development

Member, Emergency Operations Committee

I had fear, too, as a healthcare provider during the early days of the pandemic. From a professional standpoint, I'm thinking how do we provide care to people? You can do a lot of things over the telephone or via virtual, but there's a lot of stuff you can't. So we had to find that balance. My husband had a job that he could do from home and was able to stay home with our kids. Thank goodness, because daycare was closed. Personally, I almost wished I could have stayed home. But we were essential workers. I have to go in, I still have to see people, and maybe they have the virus, and they don't know it. At that point, we were still finding out what's the appropriate PPE and how to protect yourself from the virus. It was very nerve-wracking, because I didn't want to get it and then bring it home to my family.

Angela Hawley, 2022

Nurse Practitioner and Interim Director, Student Health Center

Member, Emergency Operations Committee

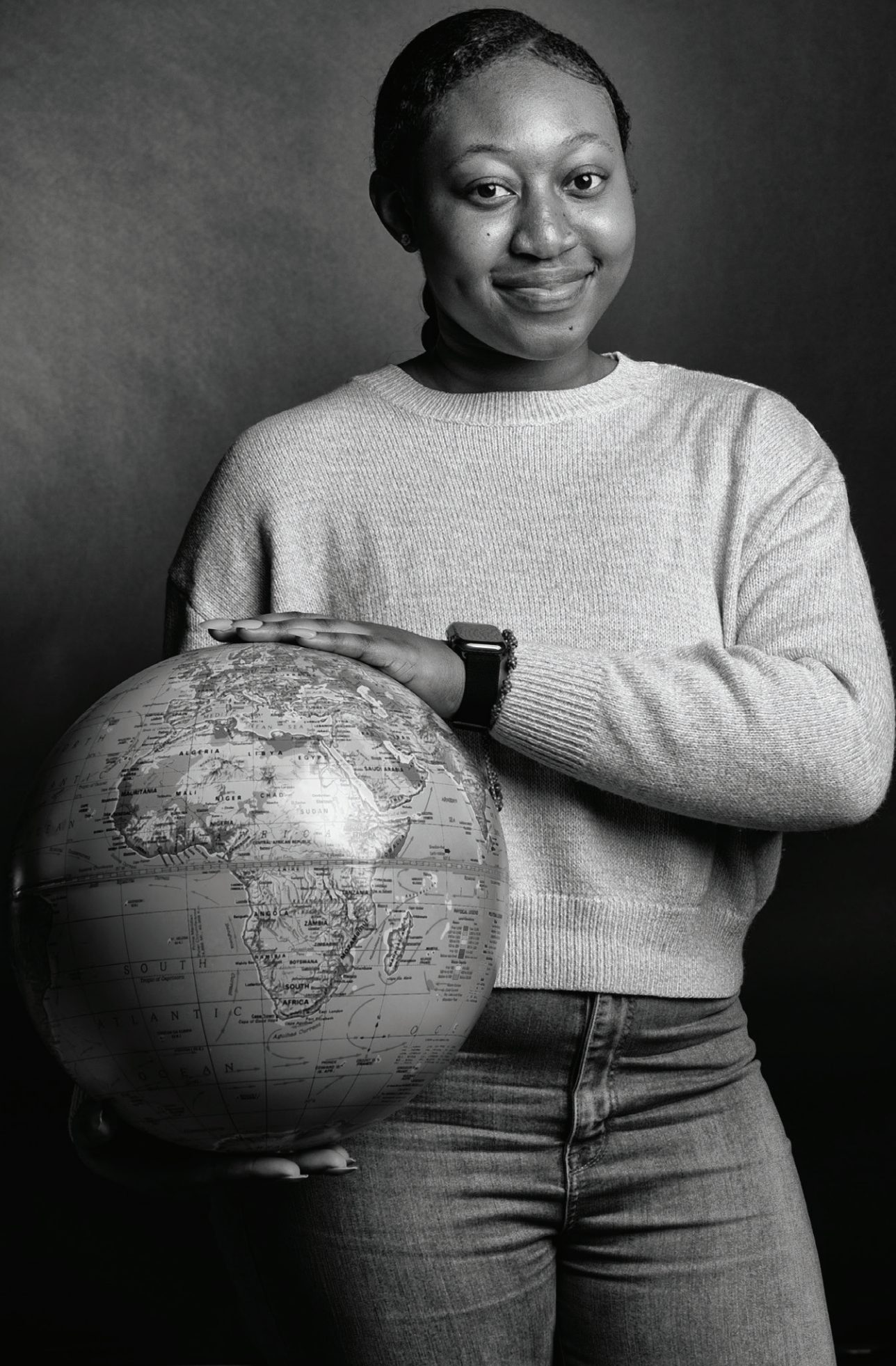




There are many things today that look, feel and operate like they did in 2019. There are many things that don't. I will always be an optimist and believe that we are better and stronger because of what we have all gone through, even though there has been horrendous loss and pain suffered. We don't necessarily want things to return to normal, because who should they be normal for? We operate in a world of higher education soaked in tradition, which is important, but a lot of the traditions that are a comfort for some people are not inclusive and comfortable for others. Maybe some things can change for the better and this amazing thing that we do at a public university can be more open, affirming and empowering to more people.

Alex Hummel, 2022

Chief of Staff, Office of the Chancellor



I am an international student from Nigeria. I started at UW Oshkosh in the fall of 2019. I was living in the dorms when we were told we had to leave because of the pandemic. We had only a few days to move out. I thought, "What am I going to do? I can't go back to Nigeria." I do have an aunt in Houston, but it was going to be too hard to get to her and live there to do school. Thankfully, I had a friend who had an apartment in Oshkosh who invited me to stay with her and another student. What we did was make a routine for ourselves. That's honestly the biggest part of getting through school online. We'd wake up like we were going to class. We'd head to the dining area. That was our study space. We would sit there, do each class, do homework after and then call it a day. Then we could do whatever activities we wanted in the house, but that was basically it. For the fall semester of 2020 I moved back into the dorms. Around Thanksgiving all my friends went home to spend time with their families, but I just stayed in Oshkosh. Because of the pandemic, I could not go home to see my family. I got to pick up a Thanksgiving dinner from Blackhawk Commons, our dining hall. I took it back to my dorm and ate it alone. There was this feeling of loneliness every now and then.

Ene Priscilla Idoko, 2021

Economics major



My roommates and I isolated together. We cried a lot together just missing our families. It's one thing when you're having fun and you don't really have time to go home. It's a different thing when you have all the time in the world, and you can't go see the people you really want to see.

Abbie Jerry, 2021

Social Work major; graduated 2022



Kylie Carrier, Lauryn Berg, Tom Cermak





There were five of us, initially, who were trained by the county as disease investigators. That was at the very end of August 2020, beginning of September, and we were able to ramp that up very quickly. It felt like a battle every day, whether it was with the issues coming up with our positive cases, or their roommates or their parents. I recruited athletic coaches, other staff from athletics to also do disease investigation. They were so great to work with. I had a really strong sense of purpose in this work knowing it was making a difference. We were able to communicate quickly with students who tested positive, calm them down, get them set up in a safer situation for them and others. We made sure that they got connected with the academic resources that they needed, so that they could stay in school and keep up.

Juliana Kahrs, 2022

Assistant Director, Health Promotion

Member, Emergency Operations Committee

My four-year contract in the Army ended. My whole plan was to get out of the military and get a job as a crane operator. I had a job lined up, but it was more of a handshake deal so as I tried to reach out to the people who hired me, it got harder and harder to contact them. I asked "Hey, are you still planning on bringing me on?" and they said that they could not with the current state of COVID. With the pressure from my parents and not knowing what to do, I decided I would make use of the GI Bill, go to college and gain some knowledge. I applied to UW Oshkosh in the summer of 2020 to begin classes that fall. I never expected to go to college, and I didn't know what to expect. I did classes in the Army, but it was Army school. I haven't done math in four years, I haven't done science in four years, so coming back, especially having a college algebra class, was rough. Another thing that I struggled with was being a non-traditional student. I'm older than everyone else. I'm not super old or anything, being 23, but it was very hard trying to relate to people four years younger than me.

Brandon Kaiser, 2021

Exercise and Sports Science major





BEING
ESSENTIAL

A Job to Do

During the early days of the pandemic, the University of Wisconsin became a ghost town. Classrooms were empty as well as the dorm rooms. Most of the staff including instructors were told to work from home. Only those deemed “essential” to the operation of the University were required to work in person on campus. For the custodial staff working remotely wasn’t an option. They had a job to do—get the campus clean and safe enough for students to return.

Custodial supervisors Vicki Stadler and her daughter Amanda “Mandy” Olesen know what they and their staff do matters. They also know that much of their work is done without fanfare and largely unnoticed by students and staff. Routinely, they deal with clogged toilets and the gross mess left by students who partied too hard. When the campus got the official announcement March 12 that because of COVID-19, UWO will flip to online instruction after a two-week break; students in residence halls were instructed to return to their permanent residences. While the campus emptied, the custodial staff just kept their collective head down and went to work.

Before COVID-19, the custodial staff know what they have to do after the students leave. The residence life or “res life” staff clean the dorms, and the academic custodial staff clean the buildings. The pandemic changed everything. The line between the two became blurred. It became all hands on deck when state officials, anticipating overwhelmed hospitals, asked UW Oshkosh to house an overflow of COVID patients. The custodial staff spent the early days deep cleaning the Horizon Village dormitory. (The overflow of sick patients never occurred in the area.) Still, with all the uncertainties and unknowns about the deadly virus, Mandy had to keep her own fears at bay. According to the CDC, almost 200,000 people died from COVID in the U.S. between March 2020 through August 2020.

“I have anxiety, and I have a couple autoimmune diseases that I have to worry about. I’m worried about taking COVID back home to my family,” said Mandy, a married mother of two. “It’s scary. And my mom is older. If we take this home, or if one of us gets sick, how do we deal with that, not just at home, but also here at work? If one of us isn’t here, I’m then handling two shifts or she’s handling two shifts. It’s really stressful.”

After cleaning and prepping Horizon, the custodial staff tackled the remaining eight residence halls and Gruenhagen Conference Center. After the school year, students usually are required to clean their own rooms and make sure everything is ready for the next year, but COVID changed that. The students left many of their belongings and trash, which meant the custodial staff were not able to clean the room from top to bottom, they had to pack up the rest of the students’ belongings and label them for future pickup.

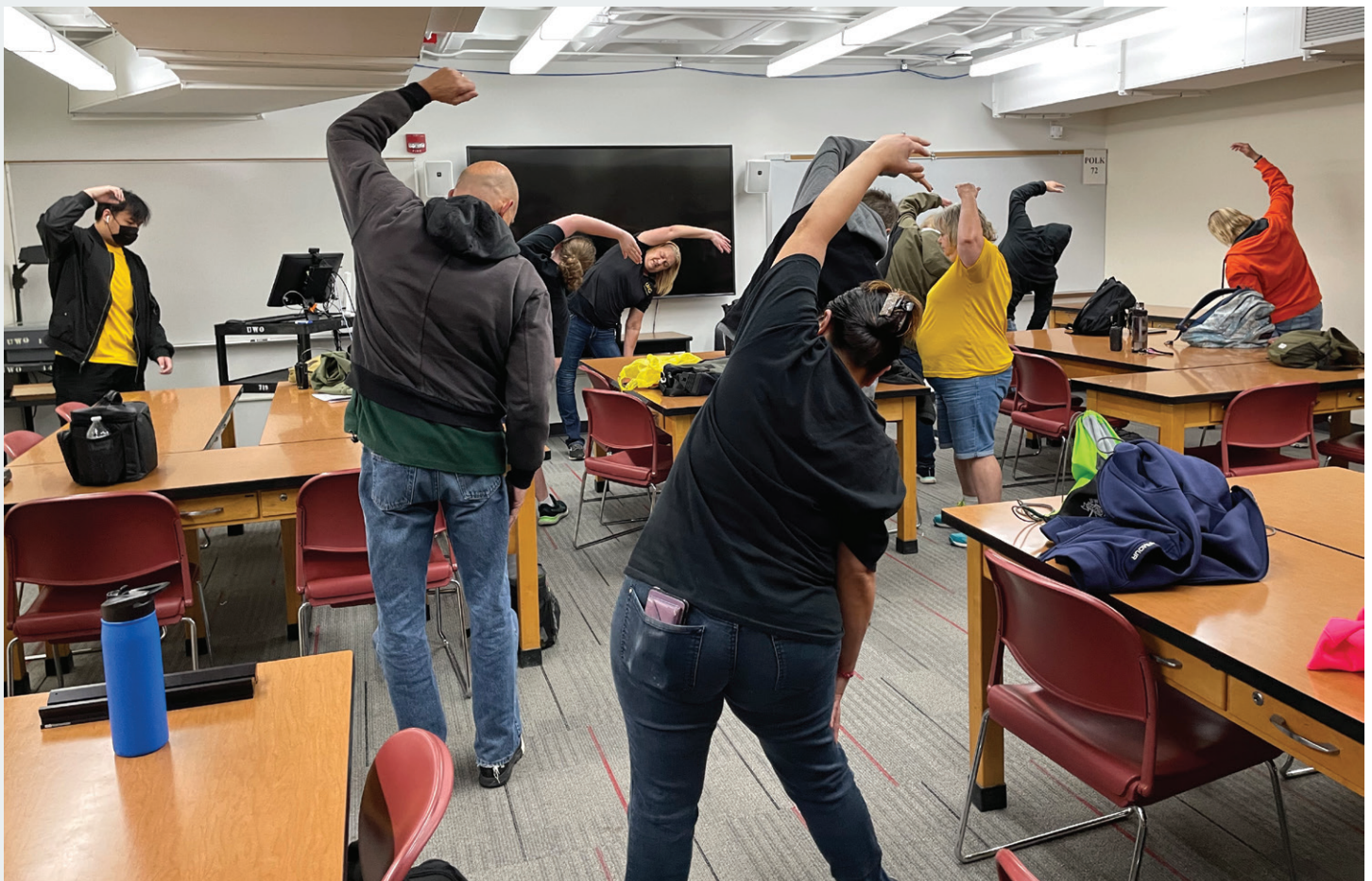
In the early days of the pandemic, Vicki was at home recovering from a replacement surgery for her right knee. She was only in week three of the usual 12-week recovery period when the campus closed down. She received constant updates from Mandy and knew her staff was getting slammed with all the extra work. She felt useless just sitting at home while everyone else was hard at work. By week six, she came back to campus, to help her team. “I was needed here. I

take my job very seriously,” Vicki said. “It wasn’t like I was cleaning dorm rooms right away on my hands and knees or anything like that. I was here to do the things I could do.”

Juggling Home, Work and a Deadly Virus

Cleaning after people’s messes was not in the plan for Vicki who was born and raised in Oshkosh. She dreamed of being a psychologist from a young age, but life has a way of changing plans. Instead of going to college, she became a wife and mother at 16 and a mother of two at 18. She needed to find a steady job. Her mother-in-law, who had been working as a custodian at UW Oshkosh and liked the steady work, suggested she give it a chance. Vicki started as a custodian in 2001 and has been a custodial services supervisor for residence life since 2011. Her daughter Mandy, after graduating from Oshkosh West, was unsure of what career path to follow. She took a few classes at Fox Valley Technical College and Moraine Park Technical College but realized juggling school and raising a young family wasn’t working for her. Her mother suggested applying for a custodial position at UWO. Mandy’s first job in 2011 was as a limited term employee cleaning Polk Library. It later became a full-time position and since 2018 she and two other supervisors have been in charge of the academic buildings.

As supervisors, they keep their work lives professional, but they know they have an unique bond as mother and daughter, and this bond strengthened them during the early days of COVID. “One of my biggest challenges was trying to keep myself focused and not panic,” Vicki said. “I’m in a position of authority. And if the authority panics, it’s just gonna spread through the crew. You have to present the front that it’s going to be okay. And if you have to break down, you do it at home, right?”





Home to both was a refuge and also a place of concern for Vicki and Mandy. Both their spouses were also deemed essential workers and worked during the time of COVID. Vicki's husband was an electrician for Pierce Manufacturing, and Mandy's husband worked as an aircraft painter for Gulfstream Aerospace Corporation.

They all were worried about bringing the virus home to their loved ones. "My mom at that time was 78 years old," Vicki said. "I had so many things go through my head. Do I stay away? I don't want to take this to her if I'm exposed. It's heart-wrenching because you need human contact, and during that time human contact was almost impossible. I remember calling my brother and saying, 'Do you want to take Mom her Mother's Day presents and put them on the deck? Then she can stay in the house and we can chat outside?'"

For years, Vicki has hosted Sunday dinners with Mandy and her family and a few other family members. They decided that in the midst of the pandemic chaos that they'd continue the tradition. "We needed that family bonding time," Vicki said.

Ghost Towns and Furloughs

The Spring 2020 semester ended with the campus looking and feeling like a ghost town. Dormitories and classrooms were empty. No one gathered at the usual places like Reeve Union or Blackhawk dining room. When the University issued students partial refunds for dining and housing, it caused a financial strain on the institution. To stave off the cash flow problem, the administration enacted a furlough program, which for the custodial staff meant a temporary reduction of two-thirds of its workforce—from the usual 75 to about four supervisors and 25 custodians. Those furloughed came back to work full time a couple weeks before the students returned to campus in the fall.

With only a skeleton crew in the summer, the custodial team still had to prepare the campus for the students' and staff's return in Fall of 2020. Following COVID-safety protocols as suggested by the University's Emergency Operations

Committee (EOC), the staff moved classroom furniture to enforce social distancing, placed plastic bags over every other seat, filled hand sanitizer dispensers and placed sanitizing wipes in every classroom. They sprayed every office and classroom with a disinfectant. Mandy and Vicki lost count on how rooms they and their staff cleaned or many chairs they bagged or how many wipes they've used. The numbers were too mind-boggling. In Sage Hall alone, there are 843 classroom chairs on the first floor and the building has three additional floors.

"Working during COVID was a lot of pressure," Vicki said. "It's not like a special COVID staff for custodial staff to do the extra duties of disinfecting and refilling sanitizers. We just had to figure it out, and sometimes that resulted in tears because we just weren't sure exactly how we were going to get everything done that we needed to get done."

Into the Danger Zone

In the Fall of 2020, UW Oshkosh opened its campus for in-person instruction, which meant students, faculty and staff were coming back. Vaccines were still many months away, which meant the University had to anticipate a surge in COVID-positive cases. The gymnasium in Albee Hall was converted into a COVID testing center. Students who tested positive or exposed to the virus were immediately sent to isolate or quarantine in "the COVID dorm," which was really Webster Hall. And the custodial staff were routinely called on to clean the one place they knew where the virus hung out.

Cleaning the COVID dorm is a process that starts in the basement of Radford, which had housed the custodial department before it moved to the basement of Polk Library in February 2021.

First, you pick up your walkie-talkie to stay in contact with the rest of the custodial staff and head to a storage





room to suit up. You step into the medical coveralls, pull it up over your clothes, and zip it up. After putting on the plastic face shield over your masked face, you pull the hood of the suit over your head. After grabbing some plastic gloves and booties to carry with you, you make the short trek from Radford Hall to the entrance of the Webster. You slip the booties over your shoes and pull the nitrile gloves on your hands. By now, there is sweat dripping down your face and soaking your clothes underneath. The suit has been trapping your body heat ever since you put it on, but it's now time to get to work.

"It's hard to catch your breath because you have your mask and the face shield," Mandy said. "We tried to rotate our custodians through that so not everyone got too winded or overheated."

Vicki shared another hazard of suiting up for COVID dorm duties. "I don't know how many times I set my keys or walkie talkie down because there is nowhere to put them in those suits," she said. "And I'd have to go back and figure out where I left them."

Unsung Heroes

Vicki and Mandy recognize the heroic work that the nurses and doctors and other first responders have done during the time of COVID. They believe that the work that they and their staff have done also contributed to keeping people safe.

"When people think of those helping to stop the spread of an illness, they're not necessarily thinking of custodial or janitorial staff, but typically, we're the ones that help stop it as quickly as we can because of the cleaning and disinfecting," Mandy said.

"We're just seen as those who clean your toilets. We're here to clean. Our overall cleaning is to be seen, but we're not supposed

to be seen. I don't like it when my workers say, 'We're just custodians.' I think custodians and janitors worldwide are the huge backbone for how the world works. If you don't have someone there to clean up after you or disinfect to keep things at bay, the world isn't going to continue. It's just not."

Vicki is proud of the role she and the custodial staff played during the pandemic. "I love my job. I like being that backbone. I'm incredibly proud of myself, my crew, and everybody who was here because we didn't give up. We didn't give in. We didn't say no. And that's what we do."



Mandy Olesen cleans classroom in the basement of Polk Library.



The first week of school, I found out that I got COVID. I had to move to the COVID dorm, which is all the way across campus. Freshman year, if you saw someone walking with bags across campus, it's COVID. Everyone knew and thought, "Oh, that person's going to quarantine."

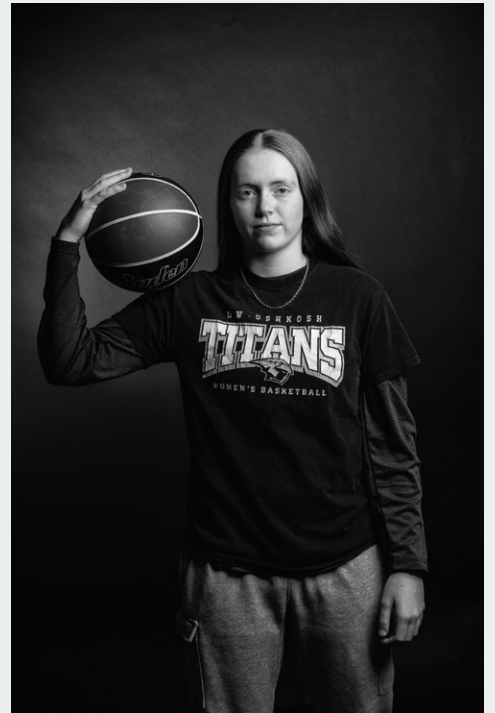
Ashley Klopatek, 2021

Nursing major





Gloria Eddy, Lydia Crow, Madalyn Cook





We canceled the seventh week of the semester, which was a week before spring break. I assembled a team that put together a website with information that included online tutorials and “instructions”—a comprehensive crash course on how to move courses online. The feedback I got from students and faculty included, “I didn’t sign up for this, this is not what I want to do, this is not what I can do.” I think it came from a fear of the unknown. Where I tried to insert myself was to say, “This is the hand that we were dealt right now, and we have to do the best that we can.” I sent a campus email on March 25, 2020—five days before we were to go fully virtual. I wrote about my mom, who was a cook at the Kenosha County Jail, and she was a wonderful cook. She taught me how to cook. But the way she cooked was usually recipe free. She may have started with a recipe, but she’d always change it, and if she was missing ingredients, she’d just figured out how to make things work. She used to tell me that she didn’t like to bake because when you bake, you have to be very precise, and she didn’t like cooking that way. Her cooking always ended up with something good to eat. So I remember writing to faculty, as we were going to begin teaching in this new format, that we have to “cook,” we can’t “bake.” We can’t make everything perfect. We’re going to be missing ingredients. We’re going to say, “I wish I had this and that and another thing.” But we’re in this really weird situation that none of us have ever been in before. We can cook and adjust the recipe and still have something pretty darn good!

John Koker, 2022

Provost



JESUS
LOVED
YOU.

Before COVID hit, I found my confidence, identity, and worth in pleasing people. I was a girl who had secretly dealt with mental illness since 5th grade. No one knew how words could affect people, and how those words could send someone into a downward spiral of something that only God himself could heal.

I went to a college where I knew no one, so I instantly became obsessed with going out, finding my worth in boys, and how I looked on the outside. I wasn't always respecting my mind, body, and soul. My entire life was turned upside down in such a short amount of time. I forgot my morals and values that I spent 20 years of my life creating. My heart and actions weren't aligning.

I was living two lives.

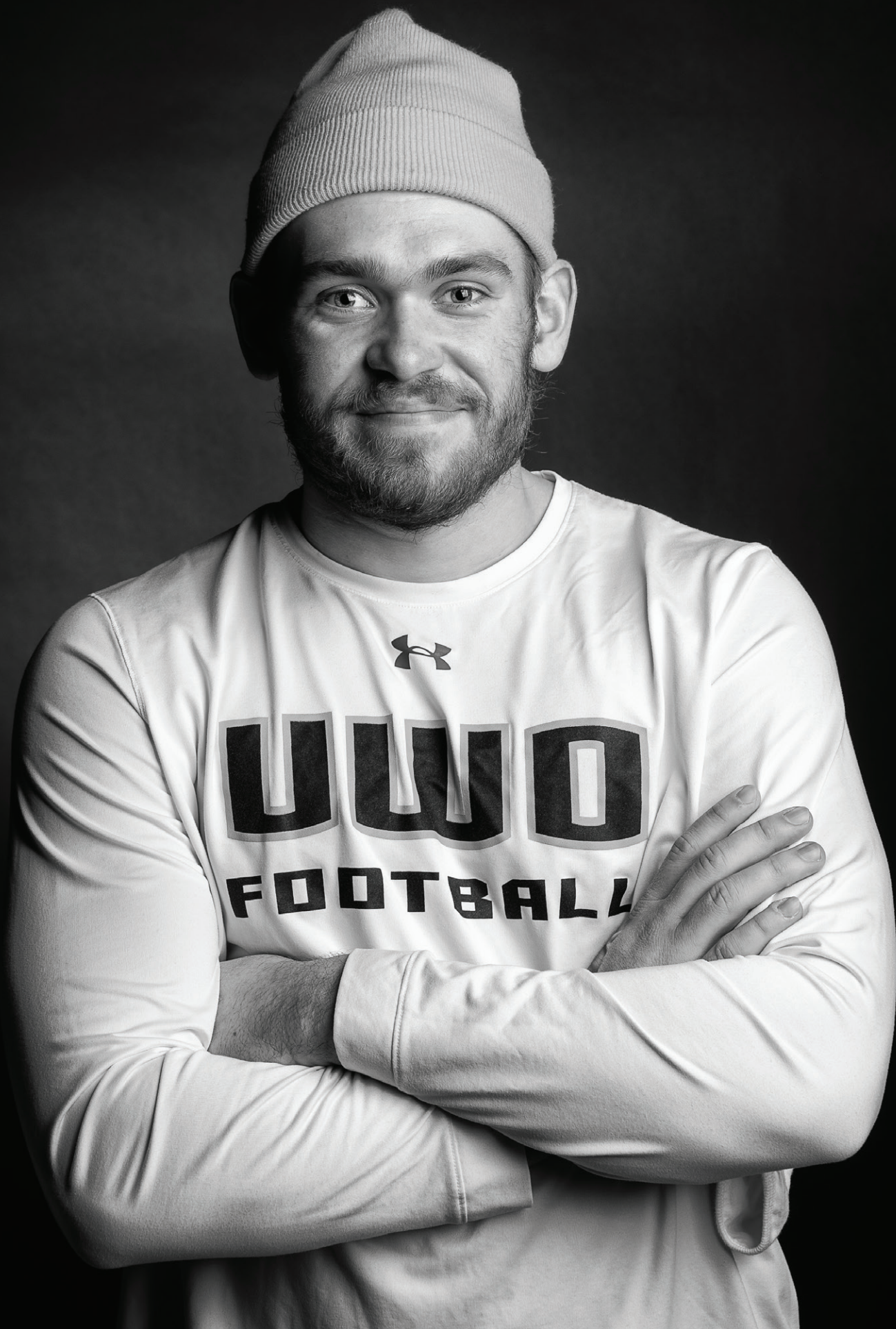
It wasn't until someone who I now call my boyfriend who opened my eyes to who I was turning into. He stood up to me, with the words, "This is not the Claire I knew and loved," which broke my heart. When COVID started, my life took a 180-degree turn. Being isolated at home for months, I had nothing distracting or influencing me away from working on my mental, physical, and spiritual health. I began reading my Bible, working out and eating healthy.

The first week back to school in September of 2020, I got COVID. I had to move dorms and be in isolation for 14 days. In two weeks of being alone, I continued to work on myself. When I got out of quarantine, I was continuously alone for the rest of the semester because my roommate never moved in. I had never really been the type to enjoy being alone, but after a year of practice I began to learn and love who I was alone. I was making moves in life that I had never made before the pandemic. I would choose to be alone in situations rather than be influenced in a way I didn't want. I set up meetings with mentors to get career advice. I started to go to therapy online for reasons that I should have gone earlier. I was doing things that five years from now I will thank myself for. I thank my God that he saw my mess and turned my mess into my message. I now live by this quote, "Don't be influenced by the people in the room but rather influence the people in the room."

Now looking back, I truly believe my living in the time of COVID turned out to be a good thing. I believe that God was giving me time to redirect my life. He was planting an opportunity for me to gain that independence and to become the woman and leader that I am today. Starting COVID I was headed down a path that I was not made to live, and now after COVID I have never been more alive.

Claire Kosteretz, 2022

Special Education major



Life as a student athlete is not easy, especially in the time of COVID. My start to college and college football was as unprecedented as it gets. Having to mask up, social distance and limit our face to face interactions hindered my social life dramatically. It was difficult to meet and hang out with my teammates knowing anyone of us could have the virus and just simply pass it on to everyone in close proximity.

I was looking forward to big team lifts and eating together in Blackhawk, our dining hall, after practice. That didn't happen because of COVID safety protocols. So I ate by myself. I was going to gray-shirt my freshman year fall of 2020, which means I could work out with the other gray shirts but not be on the official roster until the season was over with. It's a pretty common practice for freshmen to take that extra year. However, our season got canceled because of COVID, and we were blessed with the opportunity to practice a lot with the older guys from day one. We started practicing in October, and that was weird. Football usually started in August.

Since the virus was still relatively new, we had to social distance on the field and wear masks underneath our helmets and in the locker room. In February, we practiced in-doors. We still had to wear masks. We had some brutal conditioning and having masks on made it even more brutal. I was doing everything I was hoping I'd be doing as a college football player, but there was something missing. I missed hanging out and getting to know my teammates. At this point, the biggest piece of what was missing for me was eating as a team.

Our coaches recognized that we were missing that crucial part of team bonding. One day in spring of 2021, our dining hall had "premium night" which means higher quality foods like steak, brisket, shrimp alfredo and such were on the menu. The coaches shortened practice and told us to go and eat with each other. The older guys joined me and other underclassmen. We ate some good food. We had no masks on, we socialized. It was the best 30 minutes of my school year because things kinda felt normal.

Josh Kridelbaugh, 2022

Pre-Kinesiology major

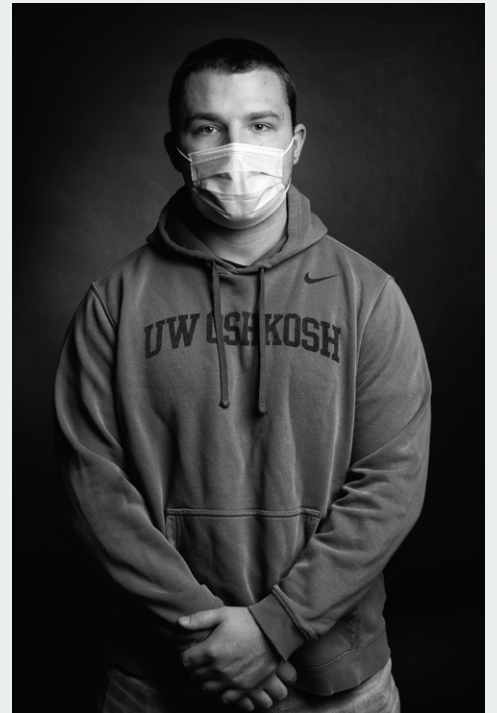


At first it was frustrating because I was supposed to give an exam the week we shut down, and we had to move everything online. A lot of us had never taught online before, so that was really stressful. It was also right around the time when our squirrels were starting to wake up. We work with thirteen-lined ground squirrels, and they were all hibernating at the time, but they were going to wake up within the next week or two. So everything kind of hit the fan all at once. It was a lot of stress and frustration more than being afraid, I would say, because I knew I could lock down in my house, but it was kind of what am I going to do with classes? And what am I going to do with my research?

Courtney Kurtz, 2021
Associate Professor, Biology



Blake Gibbs, Nick Hanke, Piper Green





The biggest challenge of my job was creating a mass testing site for COVID testing and testing individuals in a way that's never ever been done before. The Recovery Task Force came up with a plan, and we had to implement it by the return of our students for the Fall 2020 semester. We had to determine how to scale up testing. Testing is normally done at the Student Health Center, but that center is not set up for such a large operation. We spent lots of late hours calculating how many students were going to come get tested, how data would be tracked. So, building the databases, the infrastructure took a tremendous amount of work. The first day we opened the testing center in Albee Hall, it was me and Amber Allen from Prevea Health, our community partner. We had two laptops—my laptop, her laptop, and we had about eight to 10 agency nurses. The doors opened, and we started seeing patients. We were there till 2 a.m. entering results that night. We tested more than 100 students that day. That was a 20-hour day. After that we had individuals from our campus who were reassigned, so we had athletic coaches and others that were, if they weren't swabbing noses, they were entering data, they were greeting people at the door. A lot of schools hadn't even started testing when school opened, so our objective was to make sure we had testing available when our students came back, and we did.

Kimberly Langolf, 2022

Interim Chief of Staff in the Division of University Affairs

Project Manager, Emergency Operations Committee



One of the problems that we had almost immediately during COVID was the inability to get hardware like webcams and microphones to help instructors teach remotely; you couldn't buy it, you couldn't just go to Best Buy because everything was gone. You can't even order them online. So I created a little document camera setup out of PVC for about \$5. A couple coworkers and I spent a weekend building about 30 of these to hand out. It didn't have fancy features, it wasn't perfect, but you can use it to make a camera point down, and it was good enough for the time.

Brian Ledwell, 2021
Canvas Administrator (IT)

We used data to stay in front of the virus. We had students from each residence hall test once a week, not necessarily because they're sick. We were looking for trends. We're looking for where this virus is showing up. This is called hotspot policing. We use data, we see where the hotspots are, and then we mitigate them.

Kurt Leibold, 2022

Chief of Police, UW Oshkosh

Chair, Emergency Operations Committee





I had never taught online before the pandemic, and for me at least, it was not good for teaching or learning because I was talking to black squares on my screen. I didn't insist everyone turn their cameras on, but I'd ask a question, then wait and stare at names. Discussions worked better in person because you can look at them and think, "Are they completely flummoxed? Is this a stupid question?"

Gabriel Loiacono, 2022
Associate Professor, History

For Quest III classes, we're doing community-based learning with students doing projects in the community, and that suddenly just wasn't available. So we had to completely rethink how we did that and what was acceptable and what we would do for the remainder of that semester. Typically, students go into OACP (Oshkosh Area Food Pantry) and do lots of different projects there. Well with the pandemic, that suddenly couldn't happen, because they're all home. So instead, one instructor had students create a recipe book. So every student had to find a different recipe that utilized the foods that OACP has. And then they're also told to like, try to make it and write a little synopsis of it. And we put all those recipes together to make a really, really cool Quest III cookbook that OACP could use for their clients.

Mike Lueder, 2021

Assistant Director for Civic Engagement, University Studies Program





We've had young men on our team that have struggled with mental health. I think that's a new challenge coming out of the pandemic. We spend a lot of time trying to build genuine open relationships with the guys. Most of these guys just walk in your office and just lay it on you like, "I'm really struggling." Some people are more willing to go and get help than others. You just try to be supportive until they are willing to go and get the help. Competing is one of the things they really identify with being an athlete. With the pandemic and all the uncertainty, they start struggling with, "Why am I investing in this experience?" I remember sitting on a high jump mat at the far end of Kolf. Our guys were shooting, and I'm sitting on the mat with Casey Korn, our then top assistant, and we're listening to Chancellor say, "Yes, you're going to get to play games in February (2021)." Then we got to walk across the gym and tell the guys they were going to get the play. They didn't care that it was only eight regular season games. They were just excited there was something to look forward to. We couldn't have any fans in the stands, which was not as fun having a great big crowd. But there were some unique things to it that we embraced. We really pride ourselves on being passionate, energetic, enthusiastic and having the best bench in the country. It was fun, because our guys were standing the entire game cheering for one another.

Matt Lewis, 2022

Head Coach, UWO Men's Basketball



Grandpa Dude was the guy that everyone wanted to be around. He rode a 1986 Harley-Davidson XLH 1100 and wore a leather jacket and looked tough. Whenever he would ride his bike, people would yell, “Hey dude!” And I always remembered calling him Grandpa Dude. He wasn’t a big man, a little under 6-feet, but when I was younger he seemed like a giant to me.

Since I was the first grandchild, I had somewhat of a position of power because I was the first child that won everyone’s hearts. This power created an unbreakable bond between my grandfather and me. Every time I saw him, we would play rummy, a card game that he taught me when I was nine years old. I would stay overnight at his house and in the morning I would walk downstairs to him sitting at the kitchen table reading the newspaper around 6 a.m. Then we would play rummy until everyone else in the house woke up, which was normally two-three hours. But it was a rough couple of years of playing rummy because I would lose every... single... game. Grandpa Dude would never throw a game because he wanted me to understand how to lose. I understand that now but back then, it was terrible! But after a couple of years, I started to win. And it was always fun rubbing it in his face... but then the next game he would beat me and rub it back in my face.

I started competing in track and field my freshman year of high school and Grandpa Dude was my biggest supporter. Even though we lived two hours away from one another, he always made an effort to come and see at least one meet a month.

He was one of those fans that would be obnoxiously screaming in the stands. Telling me to throw the shot put as far as I could. Eventually, my grandma would tell him to reel it in a little bit because people would start staring. But I knew he wanted to be screaming his head off.

Once I went to UW Oshkosh and became a member of the track and field team, I did not get to see him as often so we started talking on the phone more. I would tell him about track and how practice was going. Grandpa Dude did not do sports in high school or college. He did pick up golf as an adult, which means that he’ll bring up his hole-in-one golfing story from the 1970s every chance he gets. This is a story that I’ve heard hundreds, if not thousands of times. And every time, the shot gets longer and more impressive.

He would always end the phone call with a “I love you, Brenn, and you are going to do big things.”

Grandpa Dude was almost 80 years old and had health issues, but these things never crossed my mind. I thought he was always going to be around.

Then COVID happened... I stopped seeing him in person because of his health issues so we relied on our phone calls and FaceTime. My whole family got vaccinated so we had our first big family reunion in December 2021. And, yes! Of course the glorious hole-in-one story came up at least once. Usually, the night comes to an end soon after dinner so I could make the two-hour drive home, but for some reason, I stayed an extra three hours. When we said good-bye, he told me, ‘I love you and you are going to do big things.’

Grandpa Dude... my rummy partner... my biggest supporter... my bike loving grandpa... my inspiration... died January 4th, 2022 from complications with COVID-19.

I miss him every day. I miss his ridiculous hole-in-one story and hearing, “I love you, Brenn. You are doing big things.”

Brenna Masloroff, 2022

Elementary and Special Education major

I've learned to step back and give people that benefit of the doubt. Some students might take advantage of that, but for the most part, I'm saying, "We're going to be empathetic. We're going to work with you, but stay engaged."

Pam Massey, 2022

Professor, Human Kinetics and Health Education

Campus Administrator, Fox Cities Campus



COVID, for me, led to a lot of self-reflection. I was used to being out with friends, getting food, and going on adventures, but when campus closed down and classes went online, I had a lot of time to reflect. COVID has taught me that being alone is OK. Growing up, I thought I was straight, but I later realized that I was bisexual. I was attracted to girls at a young age, but since I also liked boys, it was easy enough to stick with that. Before I went to UW Oshkosh in 2019, I was engaged to a man, and I was not able to explore my feelings for girls until we broke up. I came out in 2020 when we were all socially distanced and pretty much isolated. I was 26. I told my sister first since she is my best friend, and then my roommate. Since I grew up in a conservative family, it was a little rough to get my parents' support, but I had everyone else's. Due to COVID, I have not been able to go out as much as I would like so my only option was online dating. That's how I met my girlfriend.

Leah Matthews, 2021
Psychology major



As soon as I stepped foot into the wrestling room we were told masks were required to prevent the spread of COVID. This was one of the dumbest things I've ever heard. When you wrestle you sweat on your partner and are in close contact with them at all times, so social distancing was not an option.

Colby McHugh, 2022

Education major





I am introverted so as far as school goes, I was super excited to start college online. I could just sit in my bedroom and do my school work from there.

Michelle Miller, 2021

Psychology major



I was impressed by our community and by our leadership. We came together and rallied. I hope higher education learns from this that it is not a very nimble enterprise. Change happens very slowly, which in some ways I appreciate. We shouldn't change just on the whim of the moment, but there are some things that change 10–15 years too late. We don't always adapt to markets or the workforce real well. I look back on our telehealth and telecounseling like, "We should have been doing that a decade ago," right? We flipped the University online in a week or two. Higher education can be nimble and not lose what it is. Learning can change but remain true to the core of what education should be.

I don't think we have returned to normal, and I don't know when we will turn the corner on that. There is still trauma; this was a mass trauma event. I don't think we can even begin to assess any kind of normalcy until the amount of time has passed that the trauma, which in some ways, is still occurring. The clock is still ticking on COVID, so I don't know if we've started the healing process. COVID ravaged my family, and the mental health toll on us is as bad if not worse as the health toll. Feeling the responsibility of so many things and being separated from things I love like my family has taken its toll, and I'm still not the best version of myself. I don't know what it is going to take to get us back to normal or back to my best self.

Art Munin, 2022

Associate Vice Chancellor and Dean of Students

Member, Emergency Operations Committee



I've been part of the University community since I was 18. We never shut down unless it's a freaking tornado or a deep freeze. It takes a monster of an event to shut down the campus. I'm thinking, I don't think we're going to shut down until Madison or Milwaukee does. Like, if they do it, then we'll do it. Then as soon as one of them announced it, I was like, "Yep, that's it, we're going to be shut down." Coming back in the Fall 2020 was challenging with all the safety protocols. I have a small office. I cannot have an individual in my office because we had to be six feet apart. We'd put plastic playground chains across our doors because students have a habit of just walking in. You know they are comfortable and they just want to talk. So I actually had to put a chain across and be like, no, like, you have to stop at the doorway. We had to figure out how to deal with the veterans, those that have PTSD, or they have other issues they're dealing with where maybe wearing a mask and things like that is triggering to them. So we worked with the Dean of Students Office to figure out a solution for students in that situation. On a personal level, the pandemic took away master's graduation in December 2020. I did not get hooded. The graduation was virtual. I sat in my living room with my PJs and a glass of wine and watched my name go across the screen. Graduations are pivotal moments. I know why we had to be virtual, but at the same time, it still stinks.

Michelle Munns, 2022

Veterans Benefit Coordinator, Veterans Resource Center



**A CHAMPION
AT HEART**

Knocked Off Balance

UW Oshkosh gymnastics coach Lauren Karnitz sat in disbelief in room 135 of the Kolf Sports Center. She had just been given the worst news of her professional career; her team's magical season would be canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Her team had just won the WIAC (Wisconsin Intercollegiate Athletic Conference) championship for the first time since 1996 and was headed to the national championship.

After UWO Athletic Director Darryl Sims told all of the coaches that their seasons were on pause until further notice, Karnitz, body tense, shook her head emphatically. "No. We're the best team in Division III, and you're gonna keep us home? [There's] no way that I can get behind that," Karnitz said, words spilling over each other. "Isn't there anything we can do to make sure that we can get there? We can drive. Whatever we need to do, we will do."

That's when assistant football coach Luke Venne chimed in. "Listen, there is a global pandemic happening. This is bigger than you."

Karnitz, at 5-foot-3, leapt up from her seat, whipped around to face the much bigger and taller Venne, a former UWO offensive tackle. "You had your season! You don't know!"

It's not that Karnitz didn't understand the severity of a global pandemic. She did. Karnitz's great-grandfather Michele Marino, who emigrated from Potenza, Italy, in 1913, died from the Spanish flu in 1919 in Youngstown, Ohio. But for Karnitz, in room 135 on that day of the devastating news, she wasn't thinking with her head, she was all heat and heart. Karnitz felt not only misunderstood, but that maybe this wasn't her career path. Maybe she wasn't cut out to be the leading figure for UWO's gymnastics program. She then stormed out of the room and bolted into her office before slamming the door. Inside, she wept for her athletes, for herself and the lost season.

Sims then had to walk to the gym and break the news to the gymnasts. Heart heavy, he prepared to deliver the same, gut-wrenching message to the entire team. The gymnasts sat on mats, holding hands, braced, when Sims told them that their season was over. The athletes hugged each other as tears flowed. Sims, a former NFL defensive tackle, cried with them. This was supposed to be the year that UWO gymnastics, and Karnitz, did it all.

Karnitz knows what it feels like to just miss out on a national championship. She competed as an Oshkosh gymnast from 2002-06. In Karnitz' senior year, the team finished third in the WIAC before going on to finish third at the national level. The year after Karnitz left the program as a gymnast, UWO won the National Collegiate Gymnastics Association (NCGA) championship in 2007. She just missed what would have been the pinnacle of her collegiate athletic career. Now, after coaching the black and gold for 13 years, Karnitz had to swallow the harsh reality that the best team she has ever guided would not get to test their abilities on a national stage. She felt out of luck and even began questioning her purpose as a coach. "When things got shut down in 2020 I started thinking, 'Am I ever gonna get my chance? They conveniently won the year after I left and we haven't been back. Was I not meant to do this?'" That is really what has gone through

my head or was going through my head through the two years, between us winning the conference tournament and us coming back to a normal season.”

An Unsettling Feeling

While the news of no championship run was anything but optimal, Karnitz wasn't completely blindsided by it. The day before, she was in Madison at the state capital Research in the Rotunda to support one of her star gymnasts, Baylee Tkaczuk. The senior psychology major, whose research was on readmission rates at a mental hospital in relation to race, was among the student scholars from UW institutions presenting their work in the rotunda. UW Oshkosh Chancellor Andrew Leavitt and Provost John Koker were also present at the event. Karnitz had already heard rumblings of the virus, so when she saw Leavitt and Koker, she hurried over to them. She said to the Provost, “Please do not make the decision to keep us home.” He assured her that they'd do everything in their power to get the team to nationals. Karnitz, relieved, gave him a hug. However, when the gymnastics coach approached the Chancellor with the same request, she got a different response. “I could tell on his face he knew something that Provost Koker did not know.”

Just 24 hours later, it was all canceled.

Everything was lined up perfectly for the UW Oshkosh gymnastics team to win the National Collegiate Gymnastics Association (NCGA) Championship in 2020. There were so many unknowns in the early days of the pandemic, but



Star gymnast Baylee Tkaczuk and Coach Lauren Karnitz at Research in the Rotunda 2020.

what everyone did know was that a virus had reached such a severity that the gymnastics team couldn't go compete at nationals in Ithaca, New York in April. COVID-19 was spreading rampant, and students were instructed to evacuate the campus and get home immediately.

Everyone was sent home for what Karnitz and the team had hoped was a couple of weeks. Then reality set in, and the summer of 2020 was filled with "what ifs" and "what could have been" questions as the status of the pandemic worsened. That's when the squad began one of the steepest uphill climbs in a triumphant run to redemptive glory.

Adapting to a New Reality

Karnitz had to figure out how to keep her athletes motivated while making sure they kept their skills sharp over the summer without regular practices. "Gymnastics is one of those sports you can't really stop doing," she said. As a former UWO gymnast herself, Karnitz understood that there were more than just physical challenges involved in the life of a gymnast. She knew athletes' tendencies to attempt to shake off any hindrances that may distract them from performing at their best, even if that meant they were brushing off mental health issues in the process. "College athletics in general, gymnastics, is an interesting thing because you want to know how they're doing. You want them to tell you honestly, but they're so used to toughing it out that I think a lot of times it was like 'Well, I'm fine. I'm okay.'"

This entire interaction couldn't happen in person, either. Karnitz held video meetings with her athletes and was routinely challenged with trying to read how her athletes were doing over a computer screen during the summer of 2020. That summer COVID concerns prompted the NCAA to stop all in-person recruiting efforts. Karnitz and other coaches also weren't allowed to hold the usual youth sports camps that help raise funds for their programs. With their usual job duties removed, Karnitz and other members of the athletic department staff were reassigned to other duties including working on the COVID task force. Karnitz was assigned to be a disease investigator.

When the students returned in the Fall of 2020, Albee Hall, typically used for recreational sports like swimming and basketball, was converted into a COVID testing facility. Students who lived in residence halls were tested weekly. All athletes were also required to test weekly. Anyone testing positive or exposed to someone who was positive were immediately sent to either quarantine or isolate in "the COVID dorm," which was first Webster Hall, then the Gruenhagen Conference Center. "Every day we would log in multiple times a day and see who was positive. So all the positives would start coming in on the computer. And our job was to call them, contact trace, figure out who they've been around, and then get them in isolation."

When the team was allowed to practice in the fall of 2020, everything was still all but normal. The team was holding three separate practices because of COVID safety protocols. They couldn't all be in the same room because they had to be at least six feet apart throughout the entire practice. And they had to be masked. "Not only did I have to do disease investigations. I had to run multiple, two to three hour practices a day."

Karnitz's decision to have them masked up in competitions as well helped normalize the whole situation. Instead of switching between masked practices and unmasked meets, she had her athletes masked throughout the whole process. Keeping a consistent, disciplined routine led to consistent, disciplined performance.

Those first few masked practices had reluctance written all over them, as Karnitz said her athletes were hesitant and timid on routines, as anyone would be, when on the bars or the beam for the first time in months. “I will say they were much more hesitant. In gymnastics, when you’re hesitant, that’s when injuries happen. And so we had a lot of what we call crunched ankles, where when they land short, and their feet are flexed.”

The team went on to compete in four meets instead of the usual 10 in 2021, and Karnitz said there was a sense of futility coming from a bunch of athletes who weren’t competing for any national stakes. These usually motivated gymnasts were doing their routines without much of a purpose. “We had no idea what the point was,” she said. “We didn’t know what they were going to allow us to do, or what we had the capability of doing, because we didn’t know if we had testing to uphold the NCAA expectations.”

On top of this, the team had constant COVID scares. All of the team’s 2020-2021 positives were in pre season, but in 2021-2022, they had half of the team test positive 14 days prior to the first competition. (After the COVID vaccines were made available in the Spring of 2021, Karnitz said, all but one gymnast got vaccinated.)

An Opportunity for Redemption

The 2022 season seemed as if it would be more of the same, with everyone still treading cautiously as they headed to practice. However, this year there were no masks, and the athletes knew the competition would count for something. The team was hitting its stride and had won six of seven meets heading into the 2022 WIAC championship. As UWO had become accustomed to, there was a setback.

Ahead of Senior Night, where the gymnasts who were once sophomores having their season ripped away finally got to celebrate in normalcy, coach Karnitz contracted COVID-19 from her four year old child. Her husband, Quinn, and herself were fully vaccinated. However, her child was too young to get the shot



and had now tested positive twice in a five-month span. Upon testing positive a second time, her child passed the virus on to her. “You can’t be sick,” was the pleading statement many UWO gymnasts would say to their beloved coach. While her athletes were upset, the team did what they had done numerous times throughout the last couple of years; they found a way to keep pushing forward. Rahdea Jarvis was one of many gymnasts who were crushed that Karnitz couldn’t be there. Davis said, “Let’s not do that again, you need to test negative, you need to be at the meet this week.”

Karnitz could sense the chaotic feeling radiating throughout the team. She kept the team pretty structured, so when she wasn’t there, they felt a sense of disorganization. Karnitz understood, but she felt that they could still succeed without her. After all, it was a night where seniors, who were all a part of the team in 2020 who were supposed to win it all, were in the middle of their climb back to the top. This was the last time the seniors could compete at home, and Karnitz was not there. While the situation seemed dire, the team found a way to make it work; as per usual, they didn’t quit, but they persisted. Karnitz, at home on her couch, Zoom called the team. “I was using my computer and the Zoom app allowed me to make comments in the chat so my assistant coaches could relay messages,” Karnitz said.

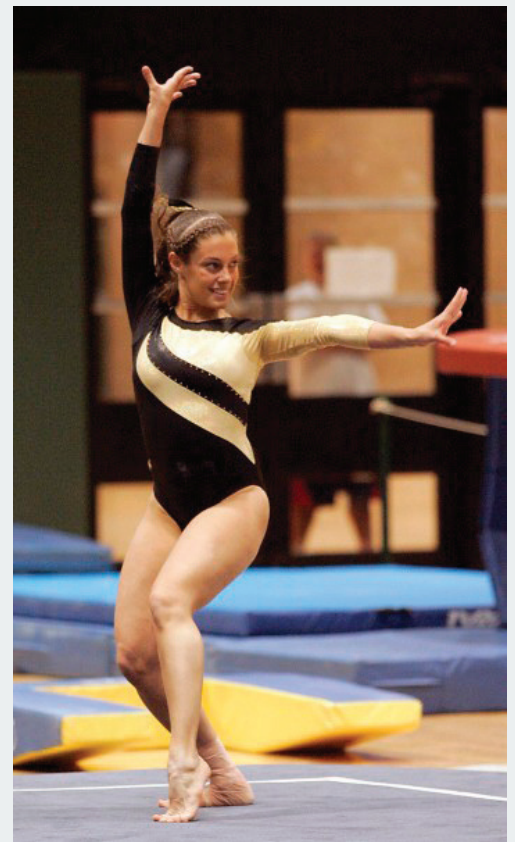
Back aches, chills and all, Karnitz sat there under a blanket as she watched her team over a TV monitor that was mounted on wheels and well in view for the team to see her reactions to their routines. To add a comical twist to the situation, they put clothes on the monitor to bring it to life. This way, she was able to give instruction while having a somewhat physical presence at the meet. Karnitz’ determined bunch would go on to win the 2022 WIAC championship two weeks later to make for consecutive runs dating back to the abruptly shortened 2020 season.

A Second Shot at Glory

Then came nationals.

After two years of tears, separated practices, additional jobs, isolation, mental health battles, doubts, injuries and positive tests at the most inopportune times, they were back. The Titans competed in Ithaca, New York for the NCGA championship on March 26, 2022. This was nearly two years to the date after they found out their 2020 season was being shut down. Karnitz noticed that her team was sharp, and as each event progressed, she knew her athletes were in the conversation among top squads in the country. “Out of the six people we had on beam, I believe four or five stuck their dismounts,” she said. “They didn’t look nervous, they didn’t wobble. It was probably the best beam set I’ve ever seen.”

As Oshkosh inched closer to their first national championship since 2007, Karnitz told her athletes they shouldn’t



Lauren Karnitz competing in 2006.

check the scores online ahead of time. “I asked my athletes not to check their phones,” Karnitz said. “If we were going to do this, I wanted the reaction to be genuine.”

Sweet, Sweet Victory

Phones or not, Karnitz had a feeling. Chancellor Leavitt and Athletic Director Darryl Sims stood by, and the dedicated coach walked over and told them that she felt like her team did it. She said that UWO national championship number 48 was in the gymnastics team’s sights.

In gymnastics, teams are called in ascending order from sixth to first. Sixth through second were announced, and then the Titans heard their score. “When they said 194, my team, everybody kind of... everybody’s jaws dropped because that’s a Division III record,” she said. “So we set a record with our team score and got to win nationals.”

The team had seen it all; every form of adversity got in this group’s way. None of that mattered. In that moment, the Titans realized what was likely the steepest, hardest climb of their lives was worth it. “My athletes, at a certain point, were like ‘we promise you we will not have a social life to be able to do this. Just so we can not get COVID,’” she said. “I mean, they did everything that they were supposed to do, everything right. And it just makes me feel like the hard work and commitment paid off.”



Looking Ahead

Overall, Karnitz said the response to the pandemic really defined and brought out the championship mentality in herself and her team. “I truly think how we handled [the cancellation] is why we won nationals,” she said. “I didn’t allow my athletes to feel like, ‘Why me?’ I didn’t allow them to feel hopeless, even though there’s days that I did, you know, I wasn’t going to let them do that and I reminded them to be grateful for every opportunity they were given.”

Being the type A personality that she is, Karnitz always wanted to be able to manage and be able to prevent any sudden changes from happening. She now knows that that isn’t the case, and she learned to understand that reacting is just as important as planning sometimes. “I can’t always control the outcome of things. I’ve had to be more flexible. My athletes have become more flexible. That was what contributed to winning at Nationals. No matter what happened, they were ready for it. Whenever we had adversity in the last two years, yes, it was upsetting, and there were a lot of tears, but it was like, ‘OK, let’s pivot. Now what are we going to do?’ That’s what made us a successful team and will continue to make us a successful team.”

(Note from the editor: The UW Oshkosh Gymnastics team led by Coach Lauren Karnitz returned to the national stage and won the 2023 National Championship on March 25, 2023.)



Honestly, I wouldn't go back in time and change anything. I was a freshman in the fall of 2020 when the campus was quiet, and everyone was isolated. If not for the pandemic, would I have talked to my professors as much as I did because no one else showed up for office hours? Even though COVID was happening, it's part of me now. It's part of my college experience.

Ellis Nabi, 2022

Biomolecular Science and Environment Health majors





Karina Hansen, Kory Helm, Vanessa Jenneman





I began my freshman year of college here at UWO Spring 2020. I was in my math class and I got a notification from the school that there will no longer be in-person classes because of the pandemic. We were told to go home until further notice. We stayed online for the rest of the spring semester.

I am a visual learner, so transitioning to online I should say it wasn't my thing, I felt less motivated and wasn't learning anything at all.

I had chemistry that semester. It was hard because the lab was done online with computer simulation. And that was just not the same as being in an actual lab with chemicals and beakers. Online, I had to click on chemicals on the screen and try to mix them. It just didn't work for me. I understand why we had to go online to be safe from a virus that we didn't know much about.

The breakout of COVID-19 has played a huge influence on me mentally, leading to certain behavioral issues. I was a new college student, and I would just sit around and get mad for no reason. Above all, the pandemic has made me feel many things - some good, sad, terrified, mostly sad.

When I heard that classes shall be returning to in-person classes in the Fall 2020, I was super excited because I felt I had missed out a lot in my freshman year.

Sarah Nirere, 2022

Elementary Education major



Whatever student we have coming to Gruenhagen Conference Center to enter isolation or quarantine, we don't necessarily know their overall life circumstances, what their home life is like, whether or not they have broader support. We want them to feel welcomed, as though they matter and that our facility is their short-term home. We see this as peace of mind for the student to know, yes, I've got a place to rest and get better and healthy. At a campus level, our students are our most important asset. Many have said nothing after their stay here, but there have been many who have said, "Thank you. I appreciate what you did. I know at other colleges, I would have had to go home." That, to me, instills a sense of personal and institutional pride in knowing that every person working here, myself included, has had an influence on the student's life and experience. These are our students. And when we exit the pandemic, I hope we always stay focused on that, because they're our students, and we need to take care of them.

Marc Nylen, 2022

Associate Director of Residence Life and Director of Conference Services
Member, Emergency Operations Committee



Griffin King,
Mira LaCrosse,
Elizabeth Konstanz





The summer between my senior year of high school and my freshman year of college, I worked in a factory making the zippers, or the part that seals the bag, for Zip-Loc bags. My work schedule was a 12-hour swing shift. I'd work nights for two weeks and then days for two weeks. My sleep schedule was pretty messed up that summer since I never fully adjusted to working days, and then I would be changed to night shift.

Once I got home, I would just sleep because my body was hurting so much from being on my feet for 12 hours. This was the summer of 2020 when the pandemic was still in the early stage. I needed a job that made good money so I could pay for my college tuition. Overtime was time and a half and Sunday's were double time.

I wasn't too worried about COVID early on. Nobody on the factory floor wore masks until they were mandated later in the summer. Through working at the factory, I learned what it was like to do hard, honest work.

Many of the other employees were married and had children of their own. They wanted to know why I was working these long hours in a factory. I told them about needing money for college. They all understood that part without question.

Some told me how they wished they had gone to college. Others said they dropped out of college because they were making enough money that they had no reason to go to college.

One lady told me how she missed out on her child's life because of her working factory hours. She said she was lucky if she was able to see her daughter for more than two hours a day. She would either come home when her daughter was waking up and going to school, or she would come home when her daughter was going to bed.

It was an eye-opening experience, and it has made me realize how lucky that I'm working in the factory out of choice and not out of necessity.

Callie Oltz, 2022

Accounting major

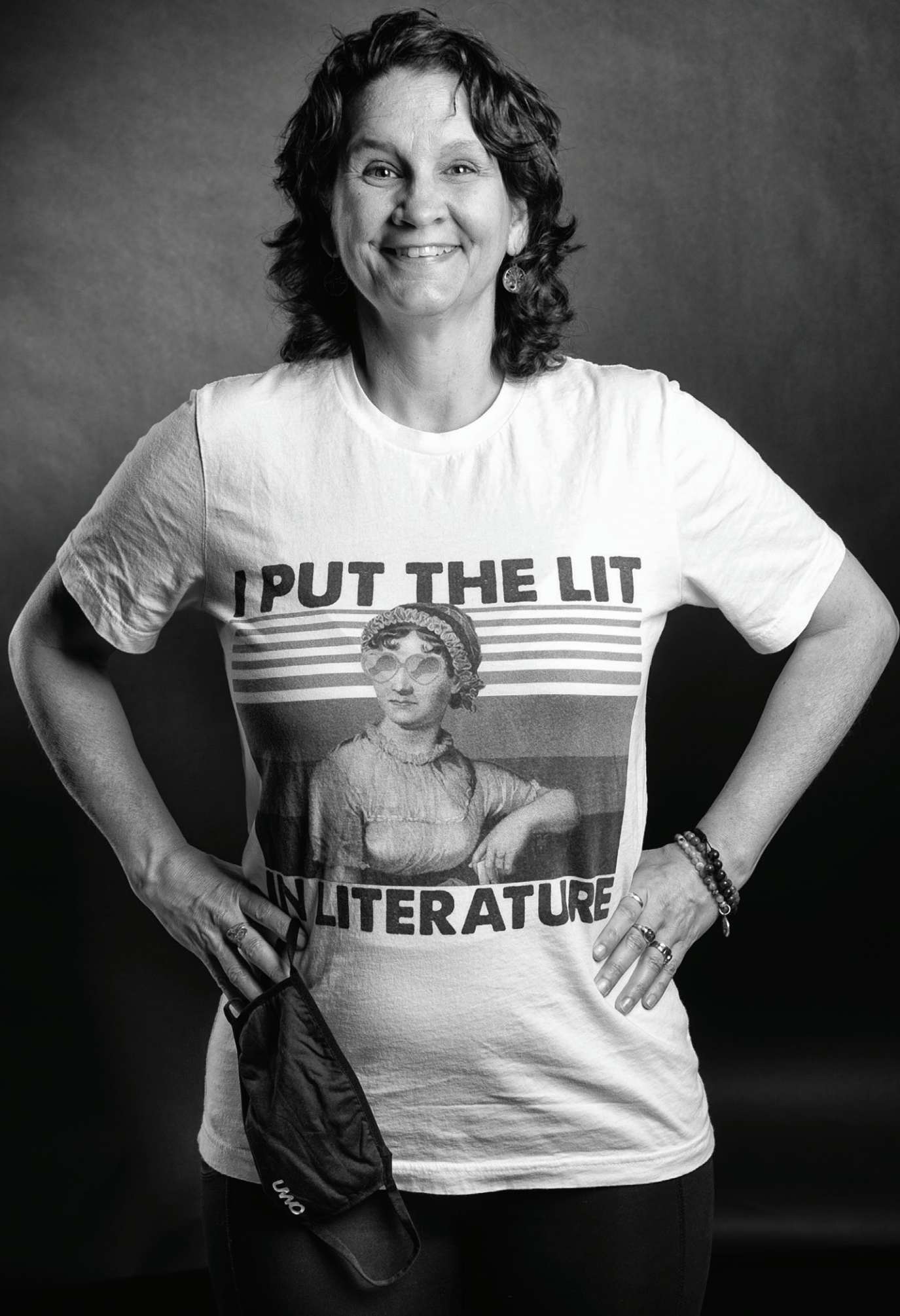


We have 19 intercollegiate athletic sports, and approximately on any given year, 550, maybe up to 600 athletes that we work with. My primary job is to direct the healthcare and oversee the health care of all our athletes and their injuries, making sure that they're taken care of. It could be something simple, like an ankle sprain, that we can take care of right in the athletic training room and do the rehabilitation there and get them back to play. During the pandemic, we had to rearrange our whole athletic training room. We had to take tables out, maintain the social distancing, masking, making sure that the athletes were getting tested. So it was a whole different atmosphere and environment than what we were accustomed to. Our athletic training room prior to the pandemic, we could have 40-50 people in there all at once. And in Fall of 2020, we're limiting it to six athletes, maybe even less than that. It was a completely different environment. In the athletic environment, we saw people come together and support each other. Whatever mutation is going to hit us, we're starting to realize more that we're going to have to coexist with this virus in the future and work on how we're going to make that happen.

Wade Peitersen, 2022

Director of Sports Medicine

Member, Emergency Operations Committee



I chose to teach fully online in the Fall of 2020, and it turned out to be the best choice because I was diagnosed with an aggressive form of breast cancer in the second week of the semester. I was told I was going to require chemotherapy infusions every three weeks through February, and I would get progressively sicker from those treatments. I am proud to say I missed only one class that semester. I worked to remain cognizant of the challenges that the students were facing, challenges that were as new to them as they were to me. My main guiding principle was to extend as much grace as possible. I still had deadlines, still had standards, but as far as I was able to extend grace when the students needed it, I gave it, and then in turn, when I needed it, when I couldn't keep up with the grading load because my brain just stopped working properly, they returned that grace to me. I would apologize and say, "I'm really sorry, I haven't gotten you feedback on this," and they said, "It's OK. We're learning about Victorian England and the way that the poor people lived. We're fine," and that was really good.

Alayne Peterson, 2022

Associate Professor, English



I lost the ability to socialize with people the normal way. I would say I have definitely forgotten how, with everything being online for a whole year and a half. Then we went from 0 to 100 so fast. I had five in-person classes right off the bat in the Fall of 2021 without any way to ease into it. It was like ripping off a Band-Aid. I noticed my anxiety started to worsen from being isolated for so long. There were random times that my anxiety would spark in the middle of class because of how quickly things had escalated. I'd have to walk out, get myself some water, take a couple deep breaths, go back and remind myself that it's fine. I went to therapy in the spring of 2021. I had some very honest conversations with my therapist, my parents and my professors. Each of them were very understanding with the challenges I was facing with COVID. This was a nice thing since we all knew I was not the only one struggling with anxiety through the pandemic. We were all in it together. Throughout my experiences with COVID, I learned that people are important and that it's important to socialize. I also learned that you need to take care of yourself mentally. However you are feeling, that is important.

Amber Richter, 2021

English major; graduated 2022



All my life I said, “Hell would freeze over before I would teach an online class,” but it’s frozen over because I did it and it was amazing. That Spring of 2020 I felt like the students and I were partners in a grand experiment. A lot of them were just as nervous about the technology as I was. So we just agreed at the outset to help one another through it, and if they had trouble, I was going to try to help them and not hold it against them. If I had trouble, they would do the same. There was a really strong sense of camaraderie. This year (Fall 2022), there are no masks, and no social distancing. The difference in the energy level, the ability of the students to engage with the class and to talk to one another to talk to us, it’s night and day. That mask made it difficult to engage with one another, even in a face-to-face way. I don’t know about everybody else. But for me it has been such a joyful semester to be on campus again, without masks. So one of the things that I’ve started to do, ironically, is to ban technology in my face-to-face classrooms. I insist that cell phones get put away, not just on the table, because there’s still a temptation there, but in a backpack or in a pocket, and that we close computer screens, and that we take notes on paper. I’m doing that this semester. There are a handful of first-year students in my American Lit class that are really struggling with this. Ninety minutes without access to their phones. It is impossible for them. COVID sent students to screens in greater numbers and for many more hours of the day, and I think some students are having trouble coming back to the non-digital world.

Ron Rindo, 2022

Professor, English



In the spring of 2020, most universities and colleges across the country were realizing they could be financially ruined by the pandemic. Students were wanting their tuition back, they weren't in the dorms, and so all the housing money had to be refunded. All the dining money that would have come in would also have to be refunded. The financial reality of the university, which had not exactly been rosy up to March 2020, really looked quite dire.

The Recovery Task Force was convinced by the testimony of the consulting doctor from Aurora that we could open safely, and we wanted to teach students as much as possible face-to-face, because they do better face-to-face. That is what students told us they wanted. There was an assumption from some of the people on the committee that faculty would be absolutely fine with coming back to teach face-to-face, that they would teach as was required by operational need; and it was already perfectly clear to me that that was not the case. Many of them were quite anxious about being on campus. Some are immunocompromised, and they're quite nervous about being in class with students. There was a moment when I said, "I don't think that's going to work. We're going to have to figure out how to let more faculty teach online." All classes with 50+ students were required to be online. And you could sense that there was a kind of divide between the academic side of the university and everyone else, because they were quite rightly worried about what was going to happen. But you had to be realistic about what instruction could really be and how this would affect both the students and faculty.

Kimberly Rivers, 2022

Interim Dean, College of Letters and Science

Member, Recovery Task Force



My grandma tested positive for COVID in summer 2020 when she was 89. She was hospitalized for two weeks. I had my CNA license, and my grandma was my first true patient. When she went home, I ended up caring for my grandmother for three months. I wore an N95, goggles and washed my hands and cleaned her surfaces constantly. Throughout this experience I learned a lot about what kind of health worker I want to be.

Kennedy Rud, 2021
Nursing major

When the two-year campuses were operating together one of the things that we did because we were 13 campuses dispersed across the state is we had become very adept at using platforms such as Microsoft Teams or Skype. We were actually early adopters of Skype for communicating. That was not really a part of how UW Oshkosh at the time operated, even having brought on the Fox Cities and the Fond du Lac campuses. As we were beginning to talk about what was going to happen with the potential closure of the campuses, I said in the chancellor's office, "One thing we're going to have to do is to learn how to communicate through video" because there were still a lot of in-person meetings that were taking place. That was in early March 2020. I knew that this was going to be the way that we were going to be communicating for at least the short-term. Little did I know it's going to be long-term.

Martin Rudd, 2022

Assistant Chancellor, Access Campuses





I think that online learning has made me a lazy student. I did a lot of lazy schoolwork, kind of half effort, hoping for at least a passing grade. This is not how I was at all in high school before COVID started. I was a hard working student and an overachiever, so COVID had really taken a toll on me from that perspective. Professors made “learning” even easier as all tests and quizzes were taken online. The workload was very limited as well, which made my low standards of getting a passing grade very simple. I believe it was hard for my professors to transition to online learning vs. hands-on learning. I think that they gave a lot of leeway to us because they understood that we were living in unprecedented times and that we struggled with a lot of things, too. Most days, I struggled with procrastination and a lack of motivation. Most of my classes were asynchronous, meaning I had to watch one to two hours of lecture videos. I was not motivated to just sit in front of my computer and watch lectures online. Deadlines didn’t feel real to me. I wasn’t getting that friendly in class reminder of “Oh, by the way, you have a paper due next class.” It got to the point where I would forget I had assignments to complete, and then all of the sudden it would strike me like “Oh yeah, I should probably finish that.” Online learning turned me into a student that I never thought I would be.

Summer Ruff, 2021

Software Technology major

Before COVID, I honestly just thought college was going to be your typical American teenage college experience, you know, going out all the time, staying up late or whatever. It was not like that at all. I didn't really go out on the weekend. I just stayed in my dorm or went home. I never envisioned a life online.

Allison Ruiz, 2021

Spanish Education major





Che Martinson, Collin Laffin, Zoe Malone





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When I first got the news that schools were being shut down for COVID, I was in the middle of what was soon to be my last baseball practice in high school. Not knowing what this would eventually lead to, we all celebrated as we got to leave practice early and plan with each other what we were going to do with a whole week off of school. Or, so we thought.

That night I went home and watched the news with my family. Around this time they established their own protocols for my sister and me. Basically, we couldn't do much besides quarantine at home. During this time and throughout that summer, I seemed to be distanced from my friends. It became hard to interact with people. Coming into college in the fall of 2020, I almost forgot what it was like to communicate with people.

With the universities setting protocols like masks, online classes, social distancing, testing weekly, and a limited number of people in a room at one time while in the dorms, it became difficult to make friends. The first semester I struggled trying to get out of my room and find something to do other than school, working and maintaining my own health. This was the hardest school year I've ever gone through. Protocols started lifting at the end of my freshman year, and I began to feel comfortable again.

I went home for the summer and it actually felt somewhat normal. Everyone was able to make plans and see each other, but we still had the worry of COVID in the back of our heads. Once most of the protocols were lifted for my sophomore year, it was like a weight was lifted from my shoulders.

I felt free.

As COVID has slowly started to fade away, it's been easier to go out, make new friends, and try new things. I finally have found myself becoming me again.

Spencer Schneider, 2022

Kinesiology - Rehabilitation Science major



In the Chemistry Department, we were not really set up for an online world. There are some great commercially available systems and simulations for some courses, but not for the ones I was teaching. There were four or five of us that were teaching the lower-level course together, and we were in daily contact to try and figure out how to teach our students. My students were doing in-person labs that transitioned to online labs. We couldn't have students doing experiments at home, so we basically either took videos of the experiment to try to explain it or we provided a data set, and then the students did the analysis of the data set. Some students did really well with it while others struggled. In some ways, everybody was just trying to survive in the STEM areas.

At home, we had other challenges. At the beginning of the pandemic, I did the grocery shopping while wearing gloves. I even went so far to have protective layers on because we didn't have an understanding of the virus at the time. I would leave a layer of my clothes outside to protect everybody in the household. The rest of the family didn't leave the house for probably six to eight weeks. My kids—who are 9, 7 and 3—were tired of it. My 3-year-old would argue with me and say that she can go in a store because she has a mask. There's some sadness in the thought that she doesn't know life without a mask; it's a whole different upbringing. We still don't eat out a lot. If the restaurants are really busy, we're not going to go there. The past two years have gone by quickly, but it still seems like a very long time.

Jennifer Schuttlefield Christus, 2022

Associate Professor, Chemistry

I gained a much greater appreciation for my presence on campus. It was something that I didn't intentionally take for granted, but when it was stripped away during the early days of the pandemic, I realized how much being here with colleagues and serving students in person really meant to me.

Nathan Scott, 2022

Interim Associate Vice Chancellor for Campus Life

Member, Emergency Operations Committee





Students were really struggling. Some students had new financial stresses; they either lost their job or their parents lost their jobs. Some had to take care of younger siblings, help them with homework and get them through their own online education. It was really quite stressful for students, and we saw that in the classroom.

Druscilla Scribner, 2022
Professor, Political Science
Faculty Senate President (2019-2021)
Member, Recovery Task Force



Those of us who have been around and been a part of sports for as long as I have, you know these athletes put in a lot of work because that's what they do. We have some really good programs, and we got really, really successful, and then it was just over because of the virus. I brought the coaches and staff in, and I let them know that we, as a campus, had made a decision that we're going to be sending the students home; we're not going to have any more competition. Then half the room went deadly silent, and the other half of the room, people were crying. It became very emotional. I think the whole thing took 10 minutes. It wasn't anyone's fault. It was just a horrible state of affairs that was going on in the world. We just happen to be a part of it. It was a very difficult day for our student athletes. When I met with them, many of them knew that I was coming to tell them that we weren't going to be competing. I said, "You are the most important reason why we're doing this." Tears everywhere. It was very painful. Yes, I cried with them because I know the amount of work they put in. The seniors we felt the worst about because some of those folks didn't get a chance to have their senior year. The NCAA came back later on and said, "Okay, if you want to come back, we'll call it a COVID year, and we won't count that against the number of years you get to compete. Some did that, but many did not. Some still remember, thinking, "You know, had we had that opportunity, we probably could have won it all, and we won't ever know."

Darryl Sims, 2022

Assistant Chancellor, Athletics



I'm a biological anthropologist. That means I study humans, how humans adapt to the world around them, and disease has always been an important thing that shaped us. One of my first responses to the pandemic was this is going to be interesting, both in terms of how we respond as a species, but also societally. Then my colleagues and I had to deal with how to fulfill our mission in this very different setting where we can't talk to people in person. Yes, we have the technology to be able to bring people together virtually, but that is very different from being together physically. I love talking to the students. I love being in the room with them.

Stephanie Spehar, 2022

Associate Professor, Anthropology

Director, Sustainability Institute for Regional Transformations



Alexa Meier, Jordyn Raba, Adam Pulvermacher





We had two weeks to get our courses online. That was a big deal because I had not taught a class—any class—online before. Many of us hadn't. I am flexible as far as creating things on the fly. For my husband, Steve Szydlik, who is also a faculty member, it was more difficult. He likes to have things a certain way and getting them to be the way he wanted took some work. We bought a little document camera to make videos. I made a video each day. I planned out what my students were going to do each week. I put instructions up on Canvas (our learning management system): we're going to meet synchronously online this day; you will watch these videos I made for you; you will do this activity with your small group; and then we're going to meet again as a class. There are office hours on Thursday, I'll be here. Drop in. Please drop in! Friday, you'll take an online quiz. I would just barely stay one week ahead. While my students were doing some of those things, I would get ready for the next week. It was significantly harder than teaching in person. But that was coupled with the fact that my service responsibility was suddenly reduced to almost nothing. There were very few meetings or policy work going on that spring. Scholarship also took a backseat. There was no travel to conferences. No presentations. No research. I don't think that I had to work more hours than usual, I was just completely focused on getting this new mode of instruction up and taking care of my students. The faculty as a whole were amazing. We put the entire University online in two weeks.

Jennifer Szydlik, 2022

Professor, Mathematics

President, Faculty Senate (2021-2023)



**PREPARED FOR
THE UNKNOWN**

Virus in our Midst

Heidi Hansen wasn't surprised when the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh closed its doors for in-person instruction as a response to the global pandemic. She knew something was up as early as January 2020 when she and another instructor took 17 nursing students to Buenos Aires, Argentina for a study abroad program. During meals at the hostel, they watched TV news that reported on a mysterious virus in Wuhan, China that was spreading to other countries. Hansen, a lecturer and a practicing nurse with a background in public health, paid extra attention. Her mind immediately went to the students with her in Argentina and to her family back in Wisconsin, almost 6,000 miles away.

"I was with Dr. Maria Graf and senior level nursing students at an international community health clinical. We started paying close attention to the news about an emerging coronavirus. I was thinking, 'How quickly is this virus going to spread? Is there going to be some sort of travel ban? What is the US response going to be? What is the human response going to be?'"

Juggling Nursing and Teaching

Hansen and her students did return home safely in late January. Their trip was among the last study abroad programs the University held for the next two years. In mid-March of 2020 when the campus closed for in-person instruction, Hansen and the rest of the campus community were faced with new challenges. For Hansen, she had to figure out a way to juggle her life both in and outside UWO. In addition to the three classes Hansen taught at the University, she was a community-based hospice nurse serving five counties including Winnebago and Fond du Lac...and she also has an immuno-compromised college-aged daughter who lived with her and her husband.

While university colleagues and students were sent home to effectively shelter in place, she and many others could not. Nurses, CNAs, and hospital staff were at the frontlines of the pandemic. As a community hospice nurse, Hansen saw up to five patients a day in homes and healthcare facilities in several counties.

Her trusty orange 2006 Honda Element had almost 370,000 miles on it. Patients who enter hospice usually die within six months, and it was Hansen's job to make them as comfortable as possible in the last stage of their life. Hansen had to adjust the way she worked. There were no vaccines available at this time, and she was entering the homes of people who may or may not be following COVID-safety protocols.

"I was working in hospice, home-delivered services, which means that as the nurse, you go where your patients are. They could be in their own home, they could be in a family's home, they could be in a hospital, long-term care facility or assisted living. In hospice the nurse not only cares for patients; they are also caring for their loved ones. But when COVID hit, we had to be as efficient as we could in our visits, and we had to stop hugging patients and families."

Like all healthcare workers in the early days of the pandemic, Hansen and her colleagues lacked the proper personal protective equipment (PPE). There was a worldwide shortage of face masks, face shields and other equipment; Hansen's employer only provided paper surgical masks that weren't effective against

COVID-19. The safer and more protective N95 masks were in short supply. Hansen and her co-workers were eventually given one N95 to be worn if in contact with COVID positive patients. Hansen used her one N95 until it ripped. Rather than throwing it away, she stapled it and made do with the little protection given to her. Then she decided to take matters into her own hands. She purchased her own N95 masks and layered surgical masks over them when caring for patients. As a frontline worker, Hansen wanted to minimize the possibility of exposing her family to a potentially deadly virus. Directly from work, Hansen would make a beeline to a secluded area of the house to clean up, retreating to her 1960 Shasta camper that was parked right behind her house. With birch wood interiors and warm glowing lights, the vintage camper served as an isolation area for Hansen.

"I ordered masks. With a background in public health and an understanding of epidemiology, I think I may have been doing this before other people were. I was also the naughty one who was buying a whole bunch of my own hand sanitizer. I was in a 'protect this house' mode. And my colleagues are part of my house. So I shared what I had with them. We didn't know much about COVID for a while. Even though I had my PPE, and I was being hyper-vigilant, you don't know what you don't know. I didn't want my family to get sick. Because I was caring for COVID-positive patients I was always doing the math, thinking, 'Symptoms start five to seven days after exposure. When was the last time I worked with a patient who was COVID-positive?' That's when I asked my husband to get the camper out of storage and we parked it behind our house. I would come home, go directly to the first floor bathroom to get cleaned up. I removed my contaminated clothing, and put it in the wash



Heidi Hansen in the debriefing room with students.

right away. Then I'd go to my camper to finish charting and work on grading. I think a lot of nurses and people who work in health care — CNAs, respiratory therapists, physicians — were in survival mode. I was concerned about the health and safety of my family and how I became a risk to them, but I didn't feel guilty about working in hospice. You can't postpone someone's death. You can't say to families whose loved ones are dying, or someone who is dying 'Maybe you can do that a little later'. It's just not an option. Knowing that more death and sickness was coming, walking away from the field just didn't seem like an option for me. I am grateful for all of the people who ran toward COVID, instead of away."

Teaching Essential Frontline Workers

The nursing program at UW Oshkosh is often touted as being among the best in the state for nursing education. Graduates routinely exceed the national passing rate on the required licensing exam for registered nurses. In addition to learning from lectures, students perform hands-on tasks in multiple high-tech labs including a hospital setting with practice mannequins as patients. They also use their skills in a real-time simulation lab, where instructors remotely play the role of the patient from behind closed doors. Before nursing students graduate they must complete a variety of clinical experiences, which pre-COVID meant the students cared for patients under instructor supervision and assisted professional nurses in area hospitals. Clinical hours are required by the Wisconsin Board of Nursing in order to obtain a nursing license.

How were Hansen and the other instructors going to teach future nurses remotely? They had two weeks to flip their courses from in-person to online. Hansen had never taught online before and quickly encountered her first big obstacle—the lack of high-speed internet. She and her family live on a five-acre farm near Ripon, Wisconsin, where the internet was slow and clunky. Hansen found herself driving to campus or local businesses, to siphon free Wi-Fi from parking lots in order to upload class content.

"Students needed my attention on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and then I worked hospice on Wednesday and Friday. When I wasn't working hospice and charting on patients, I was grading. That was just the way I lived my life for a while. I would drive to campus and park outside of Clow because there was really good high speed internet in that spot. It was a 25-minute drive to get there, but I needed to post my lectures somehow. I even remember having a meeting with my students in a Culvers parking lot because that Wi-Fi was better than mine."

Before COVID, in the simulation lab, students would receive information about a patient, and would enter a "hospital room" with a mechanized patient in the bed. Hansen would be in the tech room observing and observing through a one-way mirror. She could see the students, but the students couldn't see her. Hansen would control the vitals and voice of the "patient." The nursing



simulation lab provides students with an opportunity to practice and learn in a controlled environment before going out into the real world. Mistakes become learning opportunities. During the beginning of COVID, Hansen had to be creative. She was guiding students through simulation from home, away from the fancy control room and the high-tech simulation lab. But she and her fellow instructors still had to teach, so they created videos and role-played in real time over Zoom.

“As the instructor, I played the role of the patient and the physician. I tried to cue the students with pictures of supplies that they would find in a hospital room. Instructors provided students with images of what the simulator would look like, reports on changing vital signs, and descriptions of changing patient scenarios. I never expected to be a person who would say ‘I can do online learning’. I didn’t expect how much I would grow as an instructor by learning to use technology in that way. Before COVID, I would have been happy enough to continue teaching my courses the way I always had. But I learned new things, embraced new technologies and got innovative with my courses.”

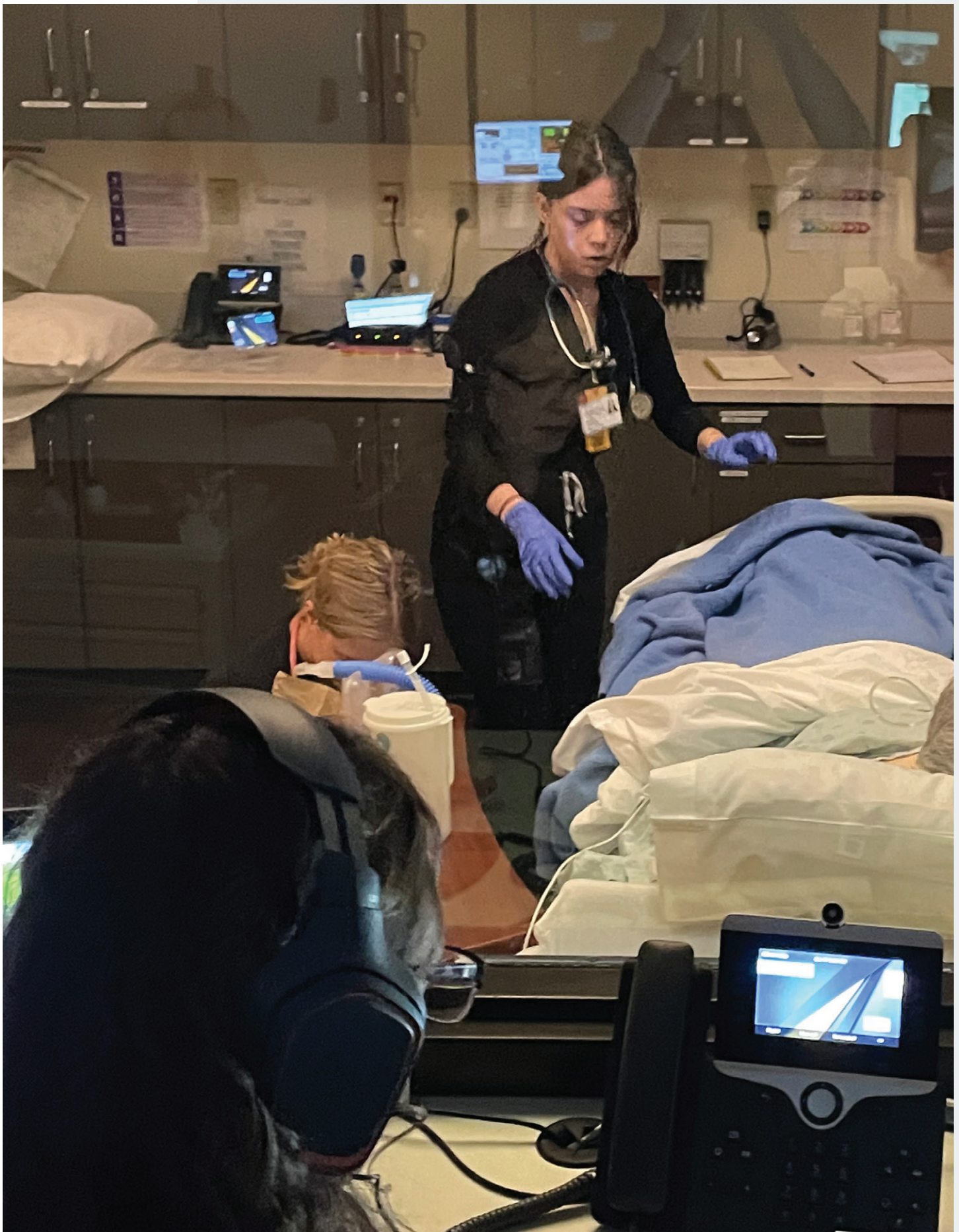
Lessons in Life and Death

In the early days of the pandemic, nationwide there were 4.2 million nurses and 1.3 million CNAs who worked on the frontlines. As the pandemic surged and hospitals became overwhelmed with patients, health care workers began to burn out. Many were exposed to and became sick from COVID, heightening staffing problems and increasing stress levels.

Hansen knew many of her students were among those at the frontlines, pre-vaccine, often working as Certified Nursing Assistants (CNAs) in nursing



Heidi Hansen and students at the vaccination centers.



Simulation lab with students.

homes where many of the most vulnerable senior populations lived. She was a hospice nurse. She was surrounded by the dying. But for her students, 18, 19, 20 years old; they understood on an intellectual level that, yes, patients do sometimes die. But to witness numerous patients under their care dying from COVID impacted them on a whole new level. CNAs were forced to take on roles far beyond the scope of their job titles. When nursing homes locked down, contact from family became strictly virtual. CNAs and other healthcare workers provided the only human contact for their patients. Dependence upon young CNAs created bonds between patients and devastation when some of these patients died of COVID-19. Hansen knew that her students may experience emotional trauma from their experiences during the early days of the pandemic.



“We had a simulation experience in which students learned to navigate caring for a dying patient and his family. After COVID, we noticed that students were experiencing emotional reactions to the simulation in ways we had not previously encountered. As a nurse, I was seeing very young people on the frontlines of a pandemic ill-equipped and asked to work outside of their scope of practice. I found it so sad that our students were taking care of aging residents who were dying of COVID in large numbers. We had to rethink how to approach content on death and dying with the students. They had already been living with death and dying at the age of 20 for so many of the past months, forcing them to grow up too fast. It just broke my heart for them.”

As a practicing nurse and a teacher of future nurses, Hansen understood that this pandemic provided extraordinary teaching and learning opportunities for her and her students. Her students learned the science behind the virus, and the value of masking and safety protocols. They witnessed the deadly effects of the virus and felt the heartbreak of the nursing field first hand. However, Hansen believed the lessons learned from living and working during the pandemic were invaluable.

“I remember telling them, ‘You are going to be the experts on global pandemics. When you’re in clinical practice, recognize this is a unique situation.’ Nursing instructors decided that we were going to utilize what was happening in the world, without sacrificing learning opportunities. So while we were learning about COVID, our students were learning about COVID. When vaccines became available, our nursing students had opportunities to give vaccine injections at clinics, both on and off campus. They built their skills by giving injections. After administering 100 of them, the excitement wore off and turned into a new awareness of ‘I’m part of something really big.’ I felt that the students were developing a sense of pride. I would tell them, ‘Your grandkids are going to ask you what you did during the pandemic, and you will be able to share with them that you helped prevent disease transmission and that you saved lives.’”





I did have a little inside information to this whole COVID thing as I worked in Dempsey Hall in the Finance and Administration office, and our Chancellor was walking through. He had this mask on, which was before it was normal to wear a mask. He said, "Start packing your stuff. We're going home." I said, "When?" and he said, "I'll send out an email tomorrow." And I was like, oh my god, this must be really serious. The excitement that was in the dorms was crazy. I lived in North Scott. So it's the dorm towers with 10 floors in it. There's a ton of people everywhere. People were drinking, they were going off the rails. They were yelling, "We were going home for two weeks! I got spring break for two weeks!" like whatever. But there was a slight sadness also, because it was our freshman year. What the heck. We're missing out. I had a feeling it was going to be longer than two weeks. There's no way that they are just going to send us home for two weeks and everything is going to be fine after that. I remember packing my stuff. I needed so much stuff. I wanted to bring everything home, but I couldn't. I had a car here, and two of my good friends had to ride home with me with their stuff. They're yelling at me to put some of my stuff back, that there wasn't enough room. But then that following weekend, we got told that we had to come back and pick up the rest of our stuff. Classes were going completely online.

Bailey Tabaka, 2022

Nursing major



I was just telling the Chief this the other day. It was January of 2008. I walked into the old police department on Rockwell Avenue and High for my interview to be a police officer here. Since the department at that time didn't have a conference room, they walked over to the old facility's building, where a group of people interviewed me, and they gave me a chance. I think about that regularly. Somebody, almost 14 years ago, gave me an opportunity to work here at UW Oshkosh. So it doesn't matter if it's a virus or a dangerous person or a tornado or whatever, I'm going to step into it, I'm going to do whatever it takes. I signed up to be whatever this place needs me to be to help keep people safe.

Christopher Tarmann, 2022

Captain, UW Oshkosh Police Department

Member, Emergency Operations Committee



I never planned on going to college. I was told that I would never make it in college, believe it or not, because I was dyslexic. I always struggled with school growing up as a kid. My mom used to drill into my head: either you go to college, you go to trade school, you go to the military, or you're going to end up in jail. So right when I had graduated high school, I enlisted in the U.S. Army, served nine years and got out in 2019. I was working in construction and as an electrician in Tennessee when I got COVID. I was actually one of the first cases to actually get COVID-19. This was January of 2020. I was in the hospital the first week of February. They kept me there for a week. I was so sick I had lost about 40 pounds, going from 190 pounds down to 145 pounds. I eventually got better and was faced with a decision. I wanted to start using my GI Bill benefits. I had the option to go to the University of Tennessee in Knoxville or UW Oshkosh where my fiance graduated from. I said, "Let's move to Wisconsin, let's start over, let's go to UW Oshkosh." I started here in the spring of 2021. What I learned from this pandemic is this: we need to take care of each other. Life is so short and being nice to people can change someone's life.

Michael Taylor, 2021

Communication Studies major



My professors were trying to get us on Zoom, but it was very hard to do lessons with instruments online, so I basically had to learn it on my own. Because of this, my grades started to get worse, and playing instruments, something I always had enjoyed doing, became frustrating.

Lindsay Thaves, 2021
Music Education major

The move-in process is usually only two days, the Sunday and Monday of Labor Day weekend. It's very high-touch and fun. We call it the first homecoming. Students didn't even take the stuff out of their vehicle. We had a swarm of student volunteers help take it out, move it to your room and you're done. Fall 2020, we went from 500 student volunteers to zero and we spread move-in over four days. We offered carts to help them carry their things, and we sanitized and scrubbed every cart after each use. We gave them their key and asked them to leave until classes started. We didn't want students to congregate and get COVID right away.

Patrick Vander Zanden, 2022

Coordinator of Initiatives Assessment and Special Programs

Department of Residence Life, Member of Emergency Operations Committee





UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN
TITANS
OSHKOSH



When COVID first hit, I was still finishing my senior year in high school. As I didn't think much of it at the beginning, I would soon learn to regret how it changed my life. As a Hmong American I would soon come to face reality that others may not see me as an American.

When COVID hit and school went online, I switched from part time to full time work so I could save money for college. I was accepted to UW Oshkosh, and I was going to major in computer science. I was working at my local Pick 'n Save in Schofield, Wisconsin.

I loved my job. My coworkers were hilarious, and my managers were amazing. I loved making conversation with the customers. During a pandemic, work was the one thing I looked forward to everyday, but this feeling would soon come crashing down.

As a floor clerk, it's my duty and job to help every customer. I saw a couple who looked lost so I asked if I could help them with anything. They looked at me and said, "We don't need help from someone like you." I didn't think much of it, and I walked away.

A couple minutes went by and I was stocking the shelf with cans of soups. I was just minding my own business when the same couple came behind me. The man said, "Hey you, I can't seem to find the pizza sauce. Maybe with your small eyes, you can squint and spot it for me."

I was shocked, but I did my job. so I showed them where the pizza sauce was and I walked away. But they still weren't satisfied because it wasn't the specific brand and demanded that I look in the back of the store for it. I told them we didn't have it in stock and suggested that they return the next day.

That's when things got even more ugly

The man said, "Why would we come back tomorrow if we need it today? Come on... I thought Asians were supposed to be smart." Before I could say anything the woman added, "You can't even do your job right. Your country starts a world-wide pandemic and now we are in a shit show. Useless, just useless. Just go back to where you belong, you don't deserve to be in America."

I just stood there. So many things were going through my head. I'm a Hmong American, I have my citizenship, I am an American. Why am I being treated this way?

Two years have passed since that god-awful day. I'm a sophomore at UW Oshkosh now, and I've never opened up about the details of the situation. A couple friends just know that I experienced something racial. I try not to think of it, but sometimes it will randomly pop up and just break me down.

This made me realize that I may be an American citizen, but to some people, just because of the color of my skin or the shape of my eyes, I'm just a person making a mess in THEIR country.

Vong Vang, 2022

Computer Science major



I worked closely with facilities because we were making determinations on hand sanitizers, signage, distancing, room capacities, changing out air dryers for hands in restrooms to paper towels. And then we have to think, do we have enough wastebaskets to gather all of the paper towels that we normally haven't had? Just so many logistical things. Not to mention, the whole PPE thing. How many masks do we need? How many N95 respirators do we need? And, of course, the whole country was looking for the same things, and so there's that panic occurring.

Lori Welch, 2022

Manager, Environmental Health and Safety

Member, Emergency Operations Committee

I honestly liked getting tested for COVID every week. I lived in the dorms, so after getting tested I felt as if a weight was lifted off my shoulders. It was another week that I was good.

Kenzie Wolfe, 2021

Radio TV Film major





Before the Spring 2020 semester even finished, I was sent an email letting me know that I was accepted into the nursing program. I was living with my grandparents. I wasn't scared of catching COVID myself, but I was more scared of me bringing it home, getting them sick. I worked as a CNA for about one or two months during the pandemic. And that's when the fear hit me. That's when I got overwhelmed by all of the sick people. I didn't know if I wanted to continue in nursing because what if in the future, there's something worse than COVID. And it was literally the day before the fall semester started that I withdrew. I sent an email to the College of Nursing and I told them that I'm going to withdraw from the program, because I wasn't willing to put my family at risk. When the pandemic hit, I thought it was the end of the world. But after a year and a half, I realized that the world has to, no, not the world...me, I have to, I have to move past this because the world is still going on outside of my house. I got a job working at home as a customer service call agent. I was able to communicate with customers from all over the United States. It was interesting hearing their stories of how COVID affected them. I realized that even though there was a pandemic, people were still living their lives. They were still ordering tents and stuff to go camping. And I realized that just because there's a pandemic doesn't mean it's the end of the world. People were still trying to live their lives. I came back to school Spring of 2022. I'm majoring in information systems now because during the pandemic, I saw how much technology was helping everyone. Everyone was doing meetings via Zoom via Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, everyone was doing everything online. I saw how much technology was helping everyone. And for me, I'm a person who really wants to help people. And originally I was going for nursing because I wanted to help people and with information systems, I can still help people just in a different way.

Rabekah Yang, 2022

Information Systems major



I was working at Walmart and commuting to school during the first year of COVID. I worked in grocery pickup at the time, so I was always on the frontline with customers and other service workers. One day, my coworker and I walked in for our shift right in the beginning of March. We happened to look down the soup aisle and it was completely empty. I've never seen anything empty like that—it was like doomsday prepping, and it honestly scared me. With everything gone, we had to start raising prices. I remember I saw a woman and her husband crying in one of the aisles. They needed baby formula. The shelf was almost totally empty, and the only kind of formula left was too expensive. They couldn't afford it, and that hit hard. The pandemic and the supply shortages were making everybody crazy, I honestly couldn't believe the way people were treating each other. I did not always have the most appreciative customer. I had a lot of people calling me names. I had a lot of people just treat me like garbage, even though I was there doing the work for them. I've cried in the breakroom so many times. This pandemic has taught me to treat people with kindness because you never know what they're going through.

Taycee Zach, 2021

Multimedia Journalism major



Cade Schmitz, Ethan Schelbert, Shahaque Rahim,





Nate Stokhaug, Ava Stoveken, Paiton Wood



UW OSHKOSH COVID RESPONSE TIMELINE

It is a common refrain—and this has been confirmed by worldwide research—that COVID altered our perception of time. We experienced so many sources of stress exactly when our lives got smaller and less varied. Our days were largely free of new experiences and so-called memory milestones. For some individuals, time seemed to crawl slowly. For others, it sped up. For many staff and students, particularly those who were working from home for over a year-and-a-half, the semesters may have combined in their minds into a difficult to order series of events. So, while a timeline of events is helpful for any historical research project, for COVID it seems doubly important. Even as participants we have a hard time remembering, so soon, what happened and when.

For this timeline, official communications and announcements of the University, UW System and other offices as well as media reports were consulted to form an authoritative sequence of events. This is useful now to provide context to the COVID stories but also as a permanent historical record.

Joshua Ranger, 2023

University Archivist and Head of Public Services

UW Oshkosh Libraries

University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, Oshkosh Campus

3/10/2020

Spring Break Advisory Issued

In an email to the UW Oshkosh community, Chancellor Andrew Leavitt advises individuals against travel over spring break and to self-isolate for 14 days after they return if they travel to an area with a large number of COVID-19 cases.

3/12/2020

University Learns It's Moving Online

Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers declares a public health emergency and in a university-wide email, Chancellor Leavitt announces that classes would be canceled for the following week, creating a two-week spring break. Following this break, Leavitt states, classes would be taught online for the remainder of the semester. Students living in residence halls are asked to return to their permanent residences after classes end the next day (March 13) and to take as many personal items as possible. International and other students who are unable to return home will be allowed to stay in the dormitories. For staff, all domestic and international travel is suspended but staff are required to report for work. All students studying abroad will be recalled.

3/13/2020

University Offices Begin to Close to the Public

In efforts to minimize in-person interactions, university offices including Cashier's Office and Undergraduate Advising announce they are closing to the public and will engage users through virtual means.

3/13/2020

Leavitt Warns Against Anti-Asian Discrimination

In light of some anti-Asian sentiments expressed in the U.S. regarding the virus and its Chinese origins, Leavitt sends an email reminding staff that ethnicity, language or association with a country or region is not a risk factor and shares a bias incident reporting link.

3/15/2020

Telecommunity Policy Announced

Leavitt announces a telecommuting policy encouraging University employees who can to work from home. In days, UW System President Ray Cross will announce employees will be given 80 hours of pandemic leave to use if they are unable to work due to COVID illness or family care responsibilities.

3/16/2020

Daycare and More Buildings Close

The Children's Learning and Care Center on the Oshkosh campus closes as do the Student Recreation and Wellness Center, Albee Pool, Rec Plex and all University libraries. The Children's Center at Fox Cities campus closes the next day.

3/16/2020

IT Provides Webinar to Support Faculty

IT offers its first of many webinars of the pandemic to support faculty moving their courses to the online environment.

3/18/2020

Campus Closes through June 5th, In-person Commencement Canceled

Acknowledging that the COVID-19 emergency requires an even more extraordinary response, Chancellor Leavitt announces that only employees who cannot deliver services via telecommuting will remain on campus. All others must return home by the end of the week. He informs the campus that the alternative delivery of courses will continue through spring interim and that face-to-face commencement ceremonies will be canceled. Students living in residence halls must now vacate all belongings unless they provide adequate justification for staying. Effectively, this decision closes campus down.

3/18/2020

WIAA Cancels Spring Sports

Wisconsin Intercollegiate Athletic Conference announces the cancellation of all competition of the spring sports season and suspends indefinitely all athletic practices and recruiting.

3/19/2020

Students Reimbursed for Room and Board

UWO announces it will reimburse students prorated charges for on-campus housing and dining plans.

3/24/2020

Evers Administration Issues “Safer at Home” Order

Through an Emergency Order, and facing growing cases of COVID-19 in his state, Andrea Palm, Secretary-designee of the Wisconsin Department of Health Services, closes all non-essential business and prohibits non-essential travel for one month.

3/24/2020

Advance-Titan Publishes its First E-newsletter

With its reporters and editors scattered and no distribution available for a paper-based newspaper, the Advance-Titan continues its coverage and documents history by publishing articles as an e-newsletter.

3/26/2020

Congress Approves First COVID-19 Aid Legislation

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES) is passed to provide relief to American institutions and individuals. The legislation includes \$6.2 Million of support for UW Oshkosh, half of which is dedicated to direct financial relief to students.

3/27/2020

Titan Rise Campaign Launched

With \$50,000 of seed money provided by an alumni, a new fund is created to raise money for programs, scholarships and, most importantly, emergency funds for struggling students.

3/30/2020

Classes Resume

Spring semester continues after a two-week break with all classes offered being taught online.

3/31/2020

First Virtual University Program of the Pandemic

The LGBTQ+ Resource Center begins a Zoom-based program series with "Being an LGBTQ+ Ally". This is the first of many UWO activities to be shifted to Zoom.

3/31/2020

Provost Cancels Dean of L&S Search

In the first of many planned searches to be canceled, Provost Koker ends the search for a new Dean of Letters and Science. Other searches underway are completed virtually, with some successful candidates never coming to campus before being hired. A hiring freeze comes soon.

4/8/2020

Leavitt Holds a Virtual Coffee and Teas with the Chancellor

Chancellor Leavitt reformats his open meeting with staff into an online synchronous event. Coffee with the Chancellor will evolve into regular and popular "town hall meetings" critical to sharing information with a far-flung staff during the pandemic.

4/9/2020

Reeve Union Hosts its First Online Event.

With its user base gone, Reeve Union staff begins to experiment with engaging students with an online Mario Kart Lap Challenge.

4/10/2020

Student Employees Receive Assistance

All work study students receive a \$200 lump sum payment. Additionally, these student employees will be paid an average salary for the remainder of the semester regardless of completing any duties.

4/15/2020

Summer School Goes Virtual

UWO extends its alternative method course delivery into the first four weeks of the summer semester.

4/16/2020

Safer at Home Order Extended

Andrea Palm extends Wisconsin's Safer at Home order to May 26 with additional exceptions made to her non-essential list of businesses.

4/20/2020

Furloughs Announced

Following Board of Regents' authorization on April 16, Chancellor Leavitt announces plans to furlough employees as the institution faces a \$4 million deficit in the fallout of COVID-19. Most 12-month employees are ultimately given eight furlough days while 180 others are furloughed continuously May 4-August 31. Nine-month employees were exempt from this first round of furloughs.

4/20/2020

Limited Dining Offered for Tier 1 Employees

Staff approved to work on campus can purchase meals and snacks from Blackhawk Express.

4/24/2020

Leavitt Announces Administrative Pay Cuts

Chancellor Leavitt states that he and his vice chancellors will take a 15 percent salary reduction effective May 2020.

5/15/2020

Police Chief Leibold Begins the Work of the Recovery Task Force

Headed by the chief, the Recovery Task Force will evaluate options for returning students to campus for the fall semester.

5/16/2020

First Online Commencement Ceremony

UWO's 146th spring commencement is held as a first-ever virtual ceremony. About 1,670 candidates for associate, bachelor's and graduate degrees are celebrated in an hour-long presentation that included formal remarks, student speeches and digital slides featuring each graduate.

6/8/2020

Polk Library Begins a Curbside Pickup Service of Library Materials

In an effort to continue its support of instruction and faculty research, Polk Library staff begin to meet users on Elmwood Avenue to deliver books and other library materials.

6/11/2020

Titans Return Plan Announced

To continue its 149-year history of service to the state, UW Oshkosh announces its health and safety measures necessary to reduce the spread of COVID-19 when it reopens for the fall. Masks, rearranged classrooms to ensure physical distancing and a mix of online and in-person classes will be implemented to keep students, faculty and staff safer. Over 200 individuals will work to implement the plan.

7/14/2020

Sports suspended on access campuses

The Fond du Lac and Fox Cities campuses have collegiate athletics temporarily suspended for the 2020-21 academic year.

7/27/2020

WIAC Cancels Seasons

The Wisconsin Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (WIAC) announces that the majority of fall sports (football, women's soccer, women's volleyball and men's and women's cross country) for the fall semester would be canceled. Women's tennis and golf would be suspended until the spring.

8/3/2020

Employees Begin to Return to Campus

After being away from their offices for almost five months, some staff sent to work from home begin to return to campus. They will be required to use face coverings (cloth face coverings, disposable face masks and disposable face shields) while in buildings and are asked to maintain physical distance from each other. Staff working alone in an office, however, are allowed to remove their masks.

8/14/2020

Second Round of Furloughs Announced

A graduated furlough plan is announced. Based on salaries, four levels of furloughs (0 to 8 days) are given with those making 60K the most and those making under \$33,000, none. Leavitt announces that this will generate \$1 million less in savings than if everyone got 8 days but considers it more fair and equitable.

8/27/2020

Alert Levels Announced

Chief Leibold announces a system of alert levels that will determine the amount of restrictions that will be in place on campus at a given time.

8/29/2020

Clean-up Days

UWO staff volunteer to clean up campus landscaping due to the lack of crew members over the summer, many of whom were lost to early retirement.

9/2/2020

Residence Hall Move-in Begins

Extended to a five-day process to aid in social distancing, students begin moving into dormitories. All residents arriving on campus are asked to test for COVID-19. All residence halls are open except for Webster Hall, which is designated as an isolation hall for students testing positive.

9/8/2020

Opening Day Goes Online

UWO hosts its first virtual opening day staff convocation. Similarly, a virtual Taste of Oshkosh website is released for students with short videos about different campus clubs, organizations and departments.

9/9/2020

Semester Begins

The fall semester begins with 68% of classes having some in-person component and 32% of classes moving fully online due to space requirements of physical distancing. All students, faculty and staff are provided with two masks, hand sanitizer and information to help them practice and promote safe behaviors.

9/14/2020

Surveillance Testing Begins

Surveillance COVID rapid antigen testing begins in Albee Hall for staff and off-campus students who visit the school. This is recommended to be done once every two weeks.

9/24/2020

In-person Dining Ended

As a small surge in cases grows, in-person seating in dining areas is closed to all students, faculty and staff. Students are provided with to-go or frozen meals to take back to dormitory rooms.

9/28/2020

Testing increases

Due to a surge in cases, testing of all residence hall students will take place every two weeks, half one week and half the next.

10/1/2020

Center for Disease Control Studies UW Oshkosh Program

Throughout October, the CDC conducts a study at Albee Hall to evaluate the performance of the antigen test to the PCR (polymerase chain reaction) test.

10/7/2020

Better than Expected Enrollments Makes Additional Furloughs Unnecessary

Leavitt reports a 7% decline in enrollment from the previous year. This is better than was feared and Leavitt states that further furloughs will not be necessary.

10/15/2020

Spring Semester Details Announced

University announces that spring semester will be handled similarly to fall with a mix of course delivery options including face-to-face, online and hybrid classes for the spring 2021 semester. Unlike some other UW campuses, UW Oshkosh will hold a spring break.

10/18/2020

Homecoming Goes Virtual

UWO's first mostly virtual homecoming week begins with window painting at Reeve. It continues with virtual trivia night, talent and lip sync contests; bingo with comedian Charlie Berens; and in-person minute-to-win-it games at the Rec Plex. It ends with a virtual homecoming meeting on Zoom for alumni featuring historical trivia and conversations with the Chancellor and athletics staff.

11/6/2020

U.S. Surgeon General Visits Oshkosh Campus

U.S. Surgeon General Vice Admiral Jerome Adams, UW System President Tommy Thompson and Wisconsin Department of Health Secretary-designee Andrea Palm visit UW Oshkosh to mark the opening of a surge testing center featuring the 15 minute BinaxNOW rapid antigen test.

11/28/2020

Theatre Streams Performances

UWO Theatre Department presents Vanya and Masha and Sonya and Spike and The Glass Menagerie as pre-recorded, pay-per-view YouTube streaming performances.

12/7/2020

Quarantine Period Shortened

Due to declining cases, UWO shortened its quarantine period from 14 days to 10 days as advised by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

2/2/2021

Titans Wrestling Match vs. Platteville Signals Return on Athletics

WIAC returned with limited seasons of men's and women's basketball, swimming and diving, indoor track and field and ice hockey, as well as wrestling and women's gymnastics. Initially no fans were allowed at competition but this restriction relaxed over time.

2/15/2021

Community Vaccinations Begin at Culver Center

After soft opening for community vaccinations begins at the eligible healthcare and essential workers, community vaccinations begin at the Culver Center for designated "Phase 1a" individuals.

3/2/2021

UWO Nursing Students begin vaccination work

Using a state grant, UWO's CON placed 198 nursing students in vaccination sites to administer vaccines, screen and educate patients and monitor patients after injection.

3/3/2021

Vaccines Begin for Staff

Student Health Center begins to administer COVID-19 vaccines to staff.

4/13/2021

Athletics returns to Access Campuses for the 2021-2022 Academic Year

After a continuing decline of COVID-19 restrictions, UWO's access campuses join the Wisconsin Competitive Sports League with the 2021-2022 academic year.

5/15/2021

In-person Commencement

UWO Hosts four commencement in-person ceremonies at Kolf Sports Center.

6/1/2021

Masking Ends for vaccinated People

Masking is no longer required for fully-vaccinated (two-shot series) individuals except in Student Health Center and youth summer camps. Surveillance testing is no longer required for fully-vaccinated individuals.

8/2/2021

Staff Return to Campus

All 12-month staff who were working remotely are required to return to campus in the manner they were working prior to March 2020. At the same time, staff are permitted to work with supervisors to include some work from home arrangements in their standard work schedule.

8/10/2021

Masking Requirement Reinstated

Masks are required again for everyone in UWO buildings unless they are alone.

9/7/2021

Fall Semester Begins

With 61% of students and 66% of staff vaccinated, a “normal” semester begins. UW System Interim President Tommy Thompson visits campus to encourage vaccination.

9/12/2021

UWO Celebrates its Sesquicentennial

With indoor and outdoor events and displays, UW Oshkosh celebrates its 150th Anniversary with a community picnic.

10/25/2021

Masking is done in Dorms

Masks no longer required in most areas of residence halls.

11/12/2021

Masking Ends in Select Buildings

Masks are no longer required at the SRWC, Rec Plex, Albee, Kolf, access campus fitness centers and Polk Library.

11/16/2021

Vaccination Program Scholarship Winners Announced

Seven UWO students won \$7,000 scholarships and ten more win \$1,000 awards in System and University vaccination incentive programs after campuses reached 70% vaccination rates System-wide.

1/31/2022

Masking is Back in Polk Library and Campus Recreation Centers.

As cases mount after the holidays, mask rules return to areas where they were previously lifted.

3/20/2022

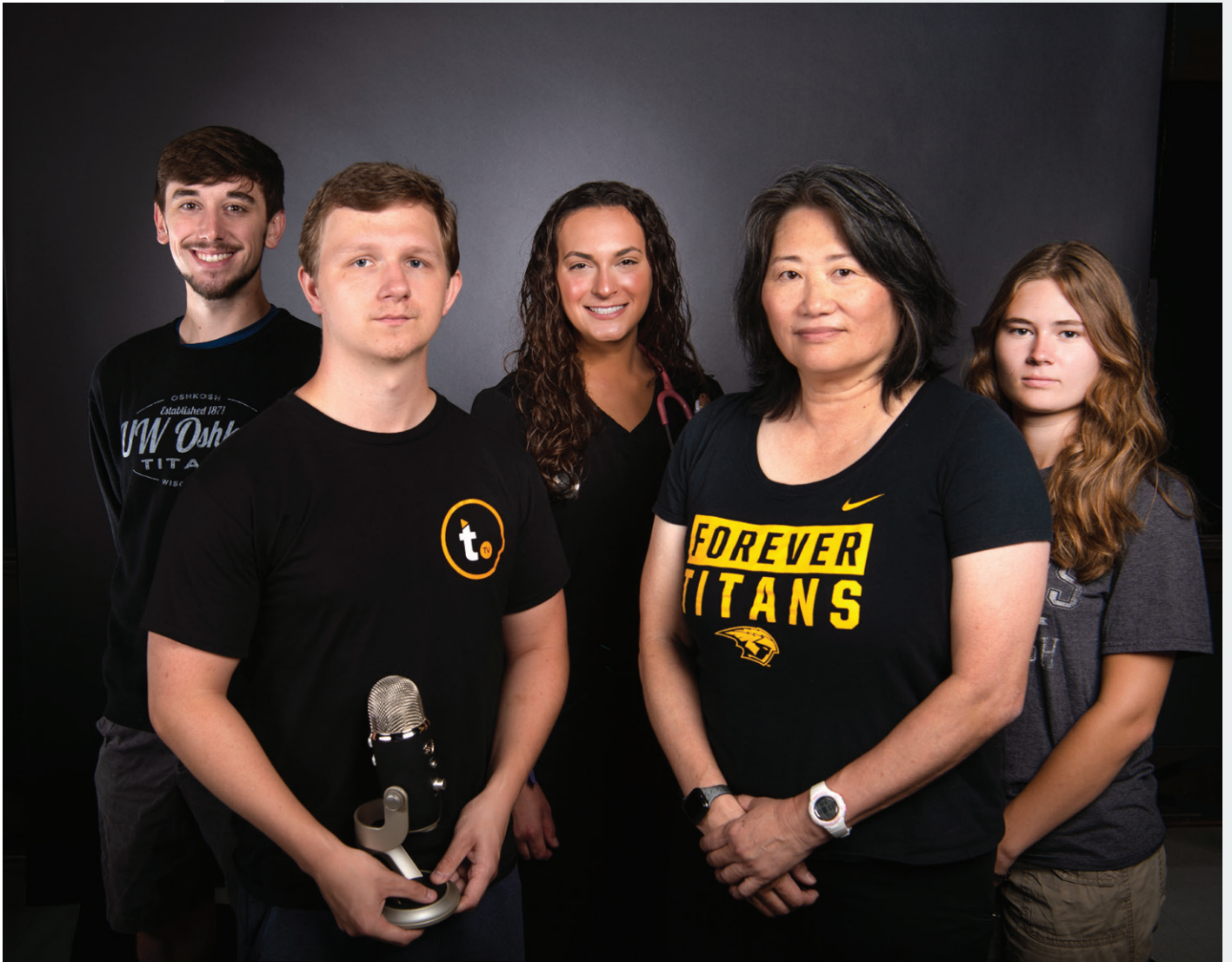
Masking Ends University-wide

After many extensions over the academic year, the mask order finally expires.



To listen to the Campus COVID oral stories or read the complete transcripts, please scan the QR code, which will take to the Campus COVID Stories page in the University Archives at UW Oshkosh.

THE TEAM BEHIND CAMPUS COVID STORIES





Because of the global pandemic I have a new appreciation for the “essential workers” in our lives. My husband, John Beam, a math professor at UW Oshkosh, and I were sent home to shelter in place in March of 2020. We were, in a sense, lucky that we were able to do that because the early days of the pandemic were scary and chaotic. The sense of dread permeated everything. We, along with other instructors, had to switch our mode of instruction from in-person to online. When we had a chance to come back to campus to teach in-person in the Fall of 2020, my husband and I decided to do so even though vaccines were still months away. I needed to be around people. I didn’t care that we had to be masked and stand six feet apart. I needed people, and, yes, I needed my students.

Grace Lim is the editor of the Campus COVID Stories project. She teaches in The Honors College and University Studies Program at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh. She is the founder and editor of the Humans of Oshkosh Storytelling Project. Lim earned her bachelor’s in journalism from the University of Texas at Austin and master’s from Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.

Brianna Storino, a senior majoring in geology, was an intern for the first year of Campus COVID Stories project. She helped with a number of interviews and assisted with the production process.



Students from two Quest III classes interviewed more than 100 people for this project. They spent countless hours transcribing more than 1.5 million words, words that will be forever preserved as a record for future generations.

Students from the Spring 2022 Quest III class:

Tyler Babalola, Paige Bacchi, Olivia Basiliere, Malida Chang, Kylie Carrier, Arif Dauti, Tiffany Gebhard, Blake Gibbs, Venessa Jenneman, Griffin King, Elizabeth Konstanz, Claire Kosteretz, Josh Kridelbaugh, Benna Masloroff, Colby McHugh, Alexa Meier, Sarah Nirere, Callie Oltz, Ethan Schelbert, Cade Schmitz, Spencer Schneider, Nate Stokhaug, Ava Stoveken, Vong Vang and Paiton Wood.

Students from the Fall 2021 Quest III class:

Holly Baierl, Lauryn Berg, Nikki Censky, Tom Cermak, Lydia Crow, Piper Green, Kory Helm, Brandon Kaiser, Ashley Klopatek, Collin Laffin, Zoe Malone, Leah Matthews, Michelle Miller, Adam Pulvermacher, Jordyn Raba, Shahaque Rahim, Kennedy Rud, Summer Ruff, Allison Ruiz, Lindsay Thaves and Taycee Zach.



I never felt so helpless in such crucial times as the Covid-19 pandemic. As a senior in high school, I was sent home to quarantine with my parents and sister. Day in and day out I watched as my mom went to her “essential” job as a nurse anesthetist, putting herself at risk in order to help the sick. Her unwavering bravery in facing the frontlines of a pandemic inspired me. I desired to do the same... run towards the danger, instead of away. I felt helpless in the sense that I could not be the one who helps. Instead, I did my duty and stayed at home, anticipating the day when I would become a nurse.

I hadn’t always wanted to be a nurse. I couldn’t stomach blood and needles. I always thought that I’d go into business or marketing, but in the summer of 2019 I worked as a camp counselor for kids with special needs and realized that the caring profession was my calling. Then COVID happened and reaffirmed my decision. Arriving at UWO for my freshman year in Fall of 2020, the campus felt like a ghost town. Social distancing, masking, and COVID protocol left me feeling isolated. Even though I was not getting my full college experience that I was expecting, I focused on my studies, which paid off when I got accepted into the College of Nursing in the Fall 2021. (I did get over my irrational fear of blood and needles). COVID may have robbed me of the typical college experience, but it has left me with the knowledge that the work that I do now as a CNA and the work I will do as a nurse is essential and not only during a global pandemic.

Emelia Smith is an Honors College student majoring in nursing. She is the president of Zeta Tau Alpha sorority. Previously a student athlete, Smith competed on the track team as well as the swim and dive team. After graduation Smith hopes to join the U.S. Air Force as a critical care nurse, and then returning to anesthesia school after serving. For the Campus COVID Stories project, she interviewed nursing instructor Heidi Hansen.



When I first came to UWO in the fall of 2019, the best word I could use to describe the environment was lively. Everywhere I turned presented me with a new opportunity to meet new people and engage in thoughtful conversations. I remember my first day on campus we had Titan Takeoff, where all the freshmen had access to a tailgate the school was putting on. I attended with my girlfriend and it was the first time she and I met the roommates that we have today. It felt like being together at UWO made us all a part of a family, people were there for each other and came together at gatherings to get to know each other more. I met my closest friends.

Then campus closed down when COVID hit and the entire experience changed. When Chancellor Leavitt first sent us home for the extended break, I thought of it as an extra vacation from all the homework I felt swamped with at the time. To me, all my old friends and I would be home for an extra week or two, and then I would return to finish out my first year of college. A week or two away became weeks and weeks alone, isolated, because we switched to a 100% format and almost everything was closed down. I wasn't sure if we would ever be allowed to come back. Freshman year went from the most exciting year of my life to the most isolated one. Once we did return, I was faced with my biggest challenge yet. Being back with everybody, it was hard not to revert back to the ways we interacted before we left. I missed the community I grew to love so much and wanted it to return to normal, but it felt like COVID made us all afraid to be together again. I felt more alone than before because everyone was here, but we couldn't be together.

UWO eventually provided us with the necessary measures to combat the pandemic and we have finally gotten a few steps closer to the "normalcy" I once knew. The pandemic taught me that I need people. Walking around campus and seeing maybe one other person on the other side of the street headed to class was depressing. We got through the awkward phases when everyone was so used to distance that it felt weird to be in close quarters, and now I feel like I can enjoy my last year on campus engaged in a community I am proud to be a part of. I have taken full advantage of our first year fully back to normal, attending football games and campus events as often as possible, and I am grateful for it. I wasn't sure if I would continue pursuing my degree online, and I am thankful for the efforts of everyone that helped get to where we are today. I am now closer with the people that got through this time of adversity alongside me than ever before.

Tanner Sarauer is an Honors College senior majoring in political science. For the Campus COVID Stories project, he interviewed Andrew Leavitt, the chancellor of the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh. After graduation, Sarauer plans on attending the University of Wisconsin Law School.



Before COVID, I wasn't very confident in who I was. In high school, I was very involved in extracurricular activities. I was president of Spanish Honor Society, Secretary of Student Council, and Secretary of National Honor Society. On the outside, I was outgoing, but that wasn't my true self. In actuality, I was a shy person and didn't like a lot of attention. While I put on the front that I enjoyed being social, I was usually uncomfortable with larger crowds. I didn't feel comfortable being myself around many people. It takes me a lot of time to be myself around people, but in high school, I wanted them to think I was confident even though I wasn't. COVID hit my senior year, so I finished high school online away from the people who thought they knew me but actually didn't. In Fall 2020, I started my first semester at UWO—a place where nobody knew me. It was a clean slate. I could be whoever I wanted to be, but that first semester was rough. Because of COVID, I wasn't able to meet many new people. I attended most of my classes from my dorm room on a computer. I would pick up my meals from Blackhawk Commons and take them back to my dorm room. The only person I spent time with was my roommate. I wasn't able to make friends with people in my classes or in the dorms or in clubs because we were always stuck in our rooms. I was so used to shaping myself into whoever people wanted me to be. I realized I could just be me.

MaryAnn Reindl, an Honors College student, majoring in medical technology, worked as a housekeeper at Jellystone campground in Fremont, Wis., during the first summer of the pandemic. She cleaned bathrooms and cabins and has a great appreciation for those who do similar jobs. For the Campus COVID Stories project, Reindl interviewed the mother-daughter duo Vicki Stadler and Mandy Olesen, who along with their custodial team, worked as essential workers during the early days of COVID.



As a UW Oshkosh freshman in his second semester during the spring of 2020, I was getting as involved as I could before the world turned upside down. I had recently been promoted to the Sports Editor position at The Advance-Titan, I was calling games for Titan TV Sports and anchoring for Titan TV News.

I remember exactly where I was when I got the news. I was in my dorm room with my roommate in Webster Hall, and my friends and I were ecstatic to be able to have a two-week break issued by the Chancellor. We figured that we'd be back in no time; we had no idea. Subsequent emails through the next few weeks indicated that the spring 2020 semester would be entirely online. As a result, my work as a reporter and broadcaster on campus was significantly altered. My work with The Advance-Titan was entirely pushed online for the remainder of spring. On the bright side, our website traffic nearly tripled.

Since spring sports were canceled, I was unable to call any UWO athletic events. Despite being an aspiring broadcaster for as long as I could speak, I had to live with the fact that I couldn't call any more games that entire semester. However, as I persisted to improve in both areas, the world slowly opened again. I started calling games again in person, but it was nothing like the pre-COVID days. Instead of passionate fans cheering from the stands, there were silent cardboard cutouts of family and friends of the athletes standing dormant in the stands. It was eerie to broadcast during such unprecedented times, but I knew the athletes' families were watching at home expecting a quality broadcast since they couldn't be there in person. This is where I learned the true importance of broadcasting in being able to bring a game to life over the airwaves.

Cory Sparks is an Honors College senior majoring in Radio-TV-Film. For the Campus COVID Stories project, he interviewed Lauren Karnitz, head coach of the women's gymnastics team. After graduation, he will be serving as the play-by-play broadcaster for the Kenosha Kingfish Baseball Club in the Northwoods League. Sparks is an award-winning journalist doing work as a broadcaster for Titan TV for which he has served as sports director. He also has served as Editor in Chief for The Advance-Titan from Fall 2021-Spring 2022 and has won awards for his column writing.



Shortly before spring break in 2020 the pandemic and possible lock downs were already on everyones mind. During the spring break Moraine Park Technical College made the decision that many colleges were forced to make and went to fully online instruction for the rest of that semester. It was hectic and stressful for everyone, but we managed to get through the semester and still have our annual student portfolio show—even though it was virtual. Fall 2021 classes at MPTC used social distancing and masking for limited on campus attendees with many classes continuing to be offered virtually for students unable or unwilling to return to the campus.

COVID is still a part of our lives, but very gradually we have returned to a new normal that for my students includes virtual attendance as an option for all Graphic Design classes. The pandemic was a painful experience, but with it has come new opportunitites and methods to serve our students that I believe will make our school more effective and our learning environment more flexible.

Shawn McAfee recived a BFA from UW Oshkosh in 1979 and returned in 1995 to work for the UWO Instructional Recources Center as a Graphic Designer. She later served as the Coordinator of the Instructional Recourse Center and spent many years teaching as an adjunct graphic design instructor for the UW Oshkosh Art department. A long-time collaboration with Grace Lim began in 2004, and has resulted in a variety of print and exhibition projects.

McAfee left UW Oshkosh in 2013 to teach Graphic Design at Moraine Park Technical College in Fond du Lac, Wis. but has continued to collaborate with Lim for Humans of Oshkosh.



My job was documenting this history in the making. I was encouraged to follow the custodial staff and capture their lives since they were really the only ones on campus. They had been working very hard in preparation for students to return back to their studies. They went through every individual classroom, disinfecting everything, placing plastic sheets over every other chair so that students could sit six feet apart, as suggested by the CDC. I have a picture of the janitors walking around and spraying disinfectant throughout the hallways. Once everything was prepared and the students came back to campus, I got to capture the later effects of COVID. When we came back in person in the Fall of 2020, everyone was masked. You couldn't even tell who people were. It was hard to fully capture expressions within life. There was less emotion in everything.

Patrick Flood is a photographer and videographer at UW Oshkosh. For the Campus COVID Stories project, he took portraits of all the project participants. He is also responsible for many of the University photographs taken during the time of COVID.



An archivist is nothing without their archives. I mean it: as fascinating, helpful and handsome as I may be, researchers don't come to visit me, but the historical materials I preserve and provide access to. Sure, I had some work I could do when I was sent home in March 2020, but I needed to be physically near our stuff to truly provide value to the University, our students and our public researchers. And COVID came right as we were ramping up work for the University's 150th Anniversary. It was, for our office, the Super Bowl, Academy Awards and Olympics all in one. And it was something that I had been preparing for for years. A lot of work needed to be done in 2020 and the materials I needed were sitting in hundreds of boxes in our facility fifteen miles away from my home.

Over the spring and summer, I was able to visit a few times, to check on the collection and make copies of public records for our researchers. These requests are something the law requires to be done in a timely manner. Still, these were short visits and I hated it. I hated feeling I wasn't useful. I wasn't providing the services I was hired and trusted to do. I hated worrying when it rained that the pipes would leak on our collections and I wouldn't be there to save them. And despite the library staff's hard work to support our students and faculty and staff through the spring, I hated that the library's doors were closed. Our job is access and for five months I couldn't provide it the way I wanted. I was an archivist without an archives, and I hated it.

Joshua Ranger has been the University Archivist at UW Oshkosh since 1998. Ranger started as an undergraduate at UWO in 1989 and, ultimately, earned his bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He also holds a honors degree from the University of Cape Town. For the Campus COVID Stories project, he constructed the University's COVID response timeline and supervised the preservation of the audio recordings and transcripts.



In February 2020, I flew out of Chicago, where I studied for my master's degree, and joined my family in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania for the big Groundhog Day celebration. With few rumblings about COVID at the O'Hare airport, there were few masks in sight, but just over a month later, I was confined to my apartment. My mother had stage 4 bile duct metastasis cancer and I was afraid to go home where I might unknowingly bring something contagious to her. Everything went online: my work as a part-time graduate assistant in the Women and Leadership Archives became social media posts and minor metadata entering, while class work and discussions became difficult.

Despite the hardships of the pandemic, there were small glimpses of light: my dad worked remotely and was able to spend more time with my mom, while my online work and classes meant I could easily go home.

At the end of April, my mom became sick and soon after, was admitted to the ICU and I flew home to be with my family. With COVID restrictions, no one could visit her while her condition deteriorated: she was sedated, eventually ventilated, but never tested positive for COVID. We were not allowed to visit her because of the COVID restrictions. The hospital staff was very kind to us – many knew my mom from her time as a nurse there. They agreed to put a small speaker on her bedside. We recorded some audio files and put on her favorite songs. The night after turning in my last final of the semester, my mom died without any family by her side. Her funeral was live streamed due to the limit of 10 people allowed to attend.

After the funeral, my sister, dad, and I just found comfort in each other's company. We played games and watched movies together. For the most part, we just stayed home. We received calls, texts, and letters of sympathy. We took the time to respond to all. But the solitude the three of us had helped immensely; we each had the space we needed to grieve in our own ways and without the pressure of other people, jobs, and school.

Miranda Ridener is the Circulation and Archives Assistant at Polk Library. She received her bachelor's in history and dance from Anderson University (Indiana) and her master's in public history from Loyola University. For the Campus COVID Stories project, she reviewed and prepared all files related to the oral histories and created the files available online for archival storage.

A Special Thank You to the Emergency Operations Committee

When the world was hit with the COVID-19 pandemic, the University's Emergency Operations Committee (EOC) was at the forefront of campus response. In April of 2020, Chancellor Andrew Leavitt had asked then-Chief of Police Kurt Leibold to put together a team of people to develop and implement a plan that would allow students, faculty and staff to return to campus safely in the Fall of 2020. Leibold, with the assistance of Kimberly Langolf and Elizabeth Hartman, asked more than two dozen people across campus to join the EOC and its subsequent off-shoot, the Recovery Task Force (RTF). At that time, Langolf was the Director of Risk and Sponsored Programs, and Hartman was the Executive Director of the Office of Economic Development. On May 15, 2020, the chancellor charged the Recovery Task Force to develop a comprehensive plan to safely offer instruction for the Fall 2020 semester by June 1. The task force tackled objectives that included evaluating scenarios for instruction; establishing a financial impact analysis for each scenario identified; and determining feedback from staff and students regarding such options. Many of the EOC also served on the task force, which held three-hour meetings three times a week. In 18 days, the task force delivered the blueprint called the Titans Return plan, which was implemented over the summer 2020, leading to return of students for in-person instruction.

Members of the Emergency Operations Committee and/or Recovery Task Force

Kurt Leibold, Chris Tarmen (University Police)
Kimberly Langolf, Michelle Bodgen-Mutzel, Lori Welch (Risk and Safety)
Elizabeth Hartman (Economic Development and Community Relations)
Peggy Breister, Trevor Clementi (University Marketing & Communications)
Buzz Bares (Dean of Students)
Juliana Kahrs (COVID Response Team)
Angela Hawley, Karen Sanchez, Nate Scott (Student Health)
Patrick Vander Zanden, Marc Nylen (Residence Life)
Mark Clements (IT)
Wade Peitersen (Athletics)
Chad Cotti (Academic Affairs)
Frank Mazanka (Custodial Services)
Missy Burgess (Reeve Union)
Victor Alatorre (Information Technologies)
Elizabeth Alderton (College of Education and Human Services)
Bob Babcock (Residence Life)
Erin Muynck (Fox Cities - Geography)
Jenna Graff (Office of International Education)
Aggie Hanni (Enrollment Management)
Nathan Krueger (COLS - Music)
Eric Kuennen (COLS - Mathematics)
Daphne Lewis (Finance)
Trent Martin (Police Department)
Ian McDonald (OSA)
Sabrina Mueller-Spitz (COLS- Biology)
Art Munin (Dean of Students)
Kimberly Rivers (COLS Dean's Office)
Bethany Rusch (Finance)
Druscilla Scribner (COLS- Political Science)
Sara Suwalski (Reeve Memorial Union)

*** Some members of the EOC and the RTF have either retired or left the University by the publication of this book.**

Special Thanks

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Zack Lind, Community Vaccination Clinic Manager, UWO
Amber Allen, Executive Director, Prevea Health

Friends of the Campus COVID Stories and Humans of Oshkosh Storytelling Projects

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The University of Wisconsin Oshkosh Office of the Provost

The University of Wisconsin Oshkosh College of Letters and Science

The Honors College at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh

The University of Wisconsin Oshkosh University Studies Program

Support UW Oshkosh

Those who wish to contribute to Humans of Oshkosh student multimedia project and others like Campus COVID Stories, we encourage you to support the work of the UW Oshkosh Foundation.

You may send your gift to:

**University of Wisconsin Oshkosh Foundation
625 Pearl Ave.
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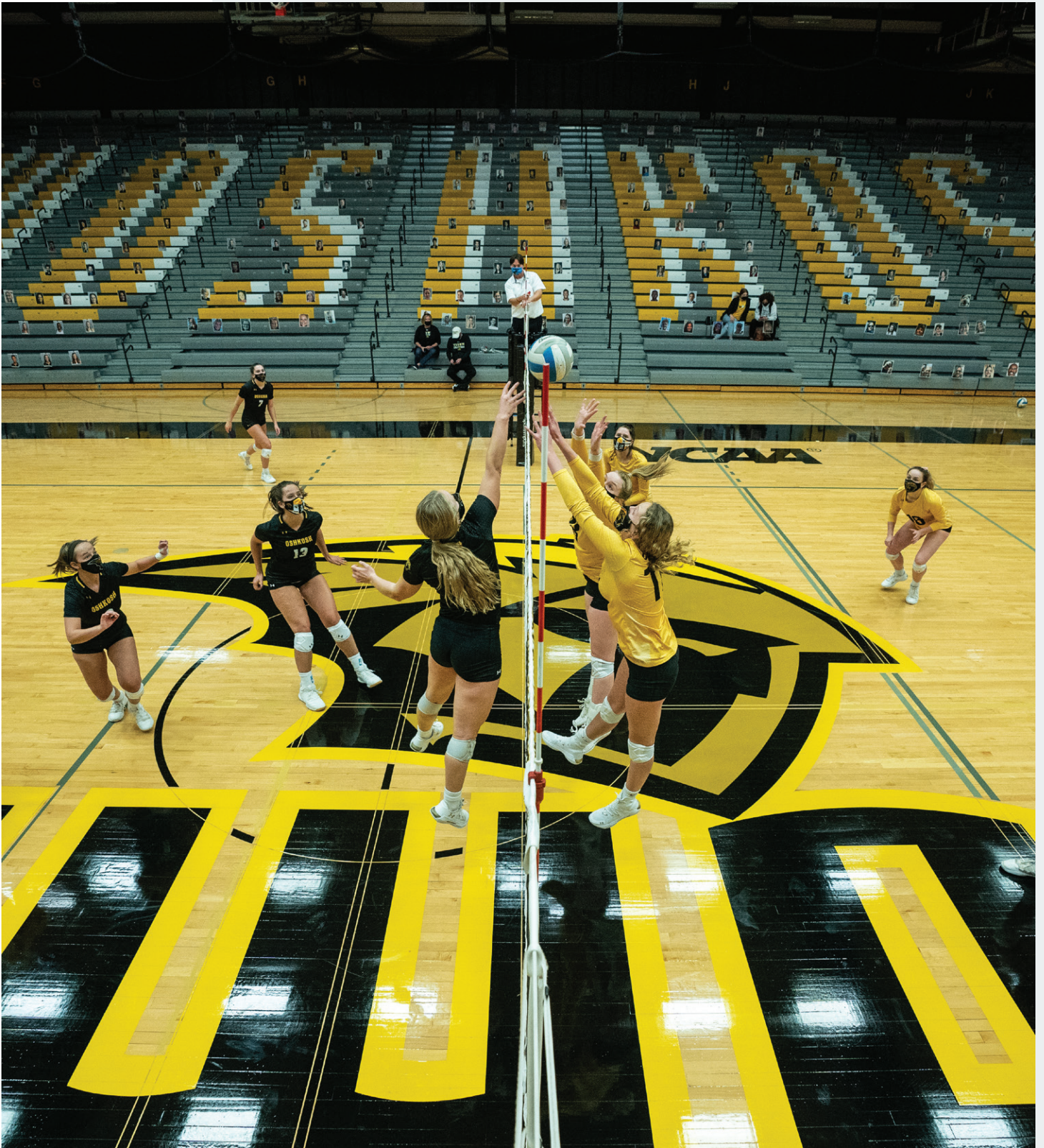






















The COVID-19 pandemic has left its mark on all of us. Lives were lost, opportunities missed, plans were interrupted—and heroes, in a variety of forms, stepped up. Telling the story of our collective trauma, loss and resilience is the goal of Campus COVID Stories, a two-year multimedia project of the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh.

Students from three classes led by instructor Grace Lim were marshaled to produce the Campus COVID Stories project. The students started by sharing their own campus COVID stories with each other, which led to a plan to document oral histories from other students, faculty, administrators and staff members. All of the recordings and transcripts—which now exceed 1.5 million words will be preserved in the University archives. For this book, the students culled a number of those stories, including those from the custodians who cared for the school to the leadership team that set up policies for the campus COVID response.

In collecting the experiences that make up Campus COVID Stories, one thing became abundantly clear. Numerous people, at great personal cost, worked largely behind the scenes to maintain the safety of our campus community. During the tragedy of the global pandemic, the people who make up the UW Oshkosh community stayed strong, supported their friends, colleagues and strangers.

Campus COVID Stories is an epic tale of strength, resilience and the human spirit. It's about a University community rallying together during a crisis, caring for each other and emerging stronger and more connected on the other side.

