

CATHY FERGUSON PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

KARA:

Hello and welcome to the podcast, a podcast produced by the College of Applied Science and Technology at Illinois State University. I'm your host, Kara Snyder, and I serve as the assistant dean of marketing communications and constituent relations for the College. Each episode, we're sitting down with an alum of the college, and today, we have a chance to talk to Kathy Ferguson. Cathy is an alum of the Department of Health Sciences and currently serves as the administrator for the Lee County Health Department. Welcome and thank you for being here.

CATHY:

Thanks for having me, Kara.

KARA:

Well, this is going to be fun. I'm excited to learn about you. So let's start at the beginning. Why did you choose ISU?

CATHY:

Well, when I was looking at colleges, I looked at a few. I really liked the Bloomington Normal area, and I loved the campus. And honestly, it was just the perfect distance from home. It wasn't too far, wasn't too close, it was a couple hours. And I liked that as well.

KARA:

And I feel like not everybody knows about health sciences and all of the majors within that department. How did you choose your major?

CATHY:

Well, I've always been interested in health, and when I started, I was thinking along the lines of PE, but back then they were making some cuts to PE, and I was worried about finding a job. So then I thought about nutrition, and found out that I didn't love chemistry, which was a problem, so I knew I wanted to do something with health

education, but not necessarily in the school setting. So when I was talking to an ISU advisor, I found out there was such a thing as a bachelor's degree in Community Health. And as soon as I heard that, I knew it was for me.

KARA:

So what do you miss most about your time on campus? You know you have this really exciting time in your life where you feel like you found the perfect fit, you found the perfect major. You're away from home, probably for the first time. What comes to mind when you think about that time in your life?

CATHY:

Well, I remember, you know, just, I love the quad. It's such a cool area. I liked hanging out Bone Student Center. And I even liked my job. I worked at the Milner library, just shelving books. But I enjoyed that the community health program wasn't really, wasn't huge, so students were able to get to know each other really well, and I liked that a lot. And in fact, after I graduated, I ended up pursuing a master's degree at NIU with a fellow ISU Community Health grad, and we were roommates through the full two years and went through the program together. So that was pretty cool, too.

KARA:

Oh, that sounds really special. What a neat time in your life. And then tell us, okay, so you go from ISU to NIU, and then what does your initial job search look like after that?

CATHY:

I feel very fortunate. I completed my graduate degree in May of 1993 and I began my first job at McHenry County Department of Health in July of that year. So I found a job pretty quickly. And I know that's not the case for everyone, so I feel very fortunate.

KARA:

Yeah, that takes some of the stress off, for sure. And then tell us. So you started in McHenry. Now you're in Lee. What did that career trajectory look like for you?

CATHY:

So I started in McHenry County in the position, it was kind of a split position of health educator and case manager. I did that for six months, and then I was promoted to the family planning coordinator. I loved both of those positions, I learned a whole lot. Really couldn't have asked for a better start to my career. But then, after two years there, I was contacted by the Ogle County Health Department, which was actually the area in which I grew up. I grew up in Mount Morris, and the idea of practicing in my hometown area was really appealing to me. So even though I loved it at McHenry, and I love the people, I took a pay cut to go home to work, and again, I love that position. Learned so much in the eight years that I was there. I worked really closely with the administrator there, and consider her a mentor. And then after those eight years, the Lee County health department administrator was retiring, and Lee County is a neighbor to ogle County. So I applied for and was selected for that position, and I assumed it in June of 2003 and I've been here ever since

KARA:

And tell us, when we're talking about being a public health administrator... you know, we have listeners from all across the college and the university. How would you describe your role to someone outside of the public health industry?

CATHY

Well, first I'd say public health one definition of it is, it's the science. Of preventing disease, prolonging life and promoting health we do that through health policy, promoting health equity, preventing and protecting against disease and injury, preparing for public health emergencies. The administrator position, specifically, I'm responsible for the overall operations of the department that includes budgeting and fiscal aspects, human resources, policy, public relations, program planning, program evaluation, quality assurance, ensuring state and federal standards are met. And I also work closely with our County Board of Health.

KARA:

And given that definition, I have to ask: I think we have to talk about the pandemic. How did your role change virtually overnight in that situation, which now is over four years ago, which seems crazy, what did that look like for you? How did you navigate what I assume was a very intense time in your career,

CATHY:

Yeah, we've had, you know, we've had local outbreaks, and we had even wider scale, like h1, n1 many years ago, but really, nothing can compare to the all consuming pandemic. I think the first thing we dealt with was information overload. And Lee County actually was one of the first counties in Illinois that had what they called back then they they called it a person of interest. So this was somebody who had a potential exposure to what we called back then, coronavirus. And because of that, I was included on some of the state and federal calls that maybe I otherwise wouldn't have been, and I also convened our local partners early on, so that was kind of the first aspect. And then, as you know, this was a novel virus, so officials were learning new things every day, and the information we provided to our partners, to our public, changed as the situation evolved. And that kind of, you know, became confusing to people, but we just reminded them, this is a new virus that's not been seen before. So we continue to learn my job really did become for a time, seven days a week, countless hours, morning till night. After that, we we had to start implementing things like the the closures, social distancing requirements, masking requirements. So as you can imagine, we weren't always popular. And then, as I'm sure you're aware, covid became highly politicized, and that was really unfortunate, because it undermined our efforts to a degree, and it made things harder than they should have been. Public Health was appreciated by some people, and then we were resented by others. We took a lot of verbal I guess I'd say, abuse on our social media, over the phone, one business owner told me that I wasn't a Christian because I was making restaurants clothes, and I felt terrible for the businesses. I I understood how difficult this was for them, but we were just trying to do our jobs, and I even had some of our county board members resentful of the things we were trying to do because of their politics. So then the next phase was when the vaccine came out, it was unlimited supply, and so we had to prioritize who could receive it, and some people who couldn't get it early on were very angry with us. One resident told me that if

her mother died from covid because she couldn't get the vaccine, that her blood would be on my hands. And I know that sounds very dramatic, but those are the types of things that we were dealing with, and our staff was exhausted, so all of that, the discontent aimed at us, was really especially hard to take, because our resilience was down. We were tired, we were stressed. We were losing residents to covid, so it was a very, very stressful time. I would say I was fortunate, because we received maybe a few verbal threats. But I actually had colleagues in other counties here in Illinois who had actual occurrences. I had a colleague who was followed home from a gas station. I had one who had her home vandalized, and one son was hit by another student on a school bus because of who his father was. So it was a tough time.

KARA:

And definitely not something that you foresee when you're in the classroom thinking about what your career in public health might be like. I mean, that is just something where you have to roll with the punches. And like you said, work seven days a week. Your job can be so demanding, and you know, particularly during high stress times like that. And I think when I think of the pandemic, I think it was, it lasted so long, right? I mean, you for a while, did not have an end in sight. How do you prioritize well being when you're in a role like yours? How do you remember to put yourself first every once in a while.

CATHY:

Well, I'll be honest, during the pandemic, I didn't have that luxury. I There were times that we felt we were barely keeping our heads above water, holding on by a thread emotionally. So it was just really difficult to have good self care during that time. Since then, though I've kind of learned some lessons, and I'm doing better at it, I am really making a concerted effort to take time off these days. I'm still trying to make up some of the time off that I wasn't able to take during those years. I love to read, I love to hike. I love to attend my son, my high school son's activities. But the other thing is that I'm much better at now because I was essentially glued to my my phone and my email and things like that during the pandemic, so now I'm really much better at leaving work. At work, I don't generally check my emails evenings or on the weekends. My employees

know if there's something urgent that I'm available by text, but just setting that boundary has made a really big difference. And tell me what

KARA:

would your advice be as you look back at that time and knowing what you know now, what advice would you give to a student who is entering the workforce about maybe how to set some of those boundaries or put some parameters in place at the outset of their career? I think that can be a challenge for some of our students, and I'm curious your take on that.

CATHY:

That's a really interesting question, because I think it is much more difficult to do that early in your career, because you're trying to prove yourself, and you're so enthusiastic and happy to be starting your career. So it's really tough early and then, and I honestly, I think that I just learned so much having gone through the pandemic and learned how important it was, because I saw the negative effect it was having on both my physical and mental health by not having those boundaries. So I would just, I guess I would just say that it's so, so important you're going to do a better job for everyone if you do take care of yourself first.

KARA:

And I know your job is something you're so passionate about. Tell us what is your favorite part of your job?

CATHY:

Most people in public health are very dedicated, caring individuals, so I really love the people that I get to work with. I also love that we serve as the community safety net. Public Health always seems to go above and beyond as we're trying to help our residents, and I'll be honest, I do like being the boss. I'm a Leo, so I'm a bit bossy by nature.

KARA:

It sounds like the perfect fit in that regard... what would you say the most challenging thing about your job is,

CATHY:

I would say funding is always a challenge in public health, it's difficult for us to compete with the private sector in terms of salaries. So when we are able to find people, it's usually because they're so dedicated, they're willing to, you know, take a little bit less of compensation compared to the private sector. But of course, there's many benefits in public health, intrinsic rewards. And I'd say the most challenging part of my job is politics. There's just so many issues that should simply be public health, and they've been politicized, and you see it nationwide today, but at the local level, we have local politics just like like you see it on the national scale, so I do my best to stay diplomatic, and sometimes that's easier than others. But again, politics, I didn't realize how political public health was until I started this position.

KARA:

That makes perfect sense. Well, Kathy, we are going to finish with a speed round so just go with your first instinct on these questions. Are you a morning person or a night owl?

CATHY:

Unfortunately, I'm both. I stay up late, but I have to get up early for work, so it's not always a big combination.

KARA:

Well, to follow up on that, then, are you a coffee person or a tea drinker?

CATHY:

I like iced tea this time of year a lot, but I every morning have to have my one cup of coffee.

KARA:

There you go. How do you take it?

CATHY:

I- usually black.

KARA:

What's for dinner tonight?

CATHY:

Tonight? I believe it's spaghetti.

KARA:

Always a hit. Describe your perfect day. If you had a free day, how would you spend it?

CATHY:

Well, my favorite place is my three season room. So I'd like to spend the morning in my three season room, leisurely drinking that cup of coffee and reading, and then I'd probably take my dog for a hike. Maybe do some shopping. I really don't have much time to do that. I order far too much online. Maybe go to. Movie, maybe out to dinner with my son or with some friends. That sounds like a perfect day to me.

KARA:

If you wrote a book, what would it be about?

CATHY:

Probably about the power of gratitude. I've had a lot of loss in my life. I've lost both parents, I've lost a spouse, and focusing on what I have to be grateful for really helped me through my grief.

KARA:

Gratitude can be transformative. I think that's very powerful. And Kathy, I ask everyone that comes on the podcast Avantis gondola or pub two cheese balls?

CATHY:

Can we say both?

KARA:

I think that's fair

CATHY:

I think that when you think of Bloomington, normal or ISU. You kind of think about Avantis, which makes people think of gondolas. So I guess if I had to choose, I'd go with that.

KARA:

You know, both is fine too, because I think the cheese bowls could be the appetizer. The gondola is the mains.

CATHY:

That works. That works.

KARA:

One last question for you, if you could give one piece of advice to a college student, what would you say

CATHY:

I would say just to soak in every college experience that they can once you enter the workforce and you get going in your career, all all the responsibilities and obligations take on a whole new level. So just soak it in, and then, along with that, follow your heart and your passion. Because even if another career might seem more lucrative, loving what you do is priceless.

KARA:

That is great advice. Thank you, and thanks again for being here. That was Kathy Ferguson, Administrator for the Lee County Health Department. Join us next time on the podcast for more stories from our cast alumni.