



STORIES

“It’s just you in family child care.”

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GUEST SPEAKER

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“Why would I start a program? There’s no money in that.”

I have a bachelor's in education pre K through six. I never intended on doing child care. I thought that taking those classes were going to be meaningless because there's no money in that. Why would I do it?

Fast forward to 2006 - I had a baby. He [husband] was going to a family child care provider and I have a group of girls that we are still trying to get together every week. We're all firefighter wives, volunteer firefighter wives, and our husbands have meetings every Monday. So we always got together. We called it Margarita Monday. So three of them were pregnant and all saying, I can't find anybody to watch my kids. What am I going to do? I said, Hey, what if I quit my job? (I was a manager at Bath and Body & Works at the time) and use my degree. They were like, you would do that? I said, well, sure, why not? So that's how I started. I ended up starting with my own 10-month old son and then basically twins because the two were born within a week of each other. So a seven-week old and a six-week old. Then the third one was born in December. So I started out with three infants basically, and then my own ten-month old son. So, that's how I got into it.

Spouses help out.

I don't know how much of a choice he felt he had. It was tough, though, working in retail and having to drop my son off. Then he would pick up at night because I worked a lot of nights. Weekends he's in a band. So that was really tough. A lot of times I would end up at the bar to get my kid after my shift to take him home. The other band wives would be watching him, you know, but not a big deal 'cause it's Wisconsin and you know, we'd have dinner, whatever. A couple of times when we were at a park switching in the middle, so the poor kid and we'd get home and he would look at me like, how did I just get here? Just because he was home with his dad and he was back home with me in the middle. So, it was hard to just finagle all of that. So, it was kind of a blessing to have me decide to do this instead.

So, a lot of times he is around - he's a full time firefighter. He works 24 hour shifts. So there are times where I'll yell, help! Come down, I need you, and luckily he is able to do that. But otherwise, it is just me and you just have to do what you have to do. The kids are really good about understanding and learning patience and kind of helping each other out. I think that kind of just comes from that family atmosphere that we have. It is just me, I do remind them, Ms. Corrine only has two arms. I can only do one thing at a time or I get confused!

A day in the life of a provider.

My first kids, I have three of them that show up at 7 o'clock, and then I do close now at 4 p.m. Because of the virtual and parents are still working from home, at least one person from each household. So, they're all done. So I am done at 4:00 p.m. this year instead of 5:00 p.m., That's been very helpful.

However, I still now [this conversation took place around 6pm] have to do extra laundry because anything cloth is supposed to be washed daily, so all of their sleeping bags get washed and it takes me a good 45 minutes to sanitize and clean everything since now, they're not allowed to put it away because of COVID. If I did have them put it away, I would have to take it all back out and clean it anyhow. So, I just haven't been having them clean it up. So, 45 minutes at the end of the day. So I'm done with work with kids at 4:00 p.m., Done, usually around 4:30, 4:45, tend to have a lot of phone calls and meetings and other things then after that, but laundry is going until 7, 8, 9 o'clock at night. Then, if I have somewhere to go, I come back, throw the next load in. A couple of times I've set my washing machine to start at 6:00 AM. So I can throw that last load in the dryer after I get up.

Some power went out about 11 o'clock and I had lunch in the Instant Pot. Luckily it was a whole chicken, so it was salvageable for last night's dinner just to keep cooking. It wasn't like a meal that then ended up being ruined. So I had that and then lost the internet. My two older sons, I can't get into my homework! I said, wait, I got a hotspot from my shared services network yesterday. It's in the bag upstairs. Go get it! So, my younger son brought it down, turned it on, got all the other laptops wired up, connected to those.

One of the kids, they had been drawing and she also comes over and starts just, "this is for mom, this is for dad, this is for Joe, this is for mom. Then another one comes over, "and these are from my mom and this is for Mila", as I'm trying to literally type on the computer, putting in the hotspot password to get that going. So those kids could get their things that they needed to get on.

Then I had one of the kids, "I have to go potty!" Okay. He comes back out, "It's dark!" I'm like, oh, that's right! There's no lights and that room is really dark. So I grabbed my phone, turned on the flashlight, took him in, noticed that another one had pooped, so that like, come with me too. That's one to try and change a diaper with a flashlight. Then, got everybody settled, got everyone down. Internet came back on. Power came back on, figured out I have peanut butter and crackers. Luckily nobody has allergies. That's what we had for lunch. Quick, got that together.

Finally got them fed and then, just in time for one of my kiddos who has special needs, it was her OT and her special ed teacher at 1 o'clock. I had to get onto that Zoom with her. I did not have time to get the kids down for nap before this. So they were happy, they continued to play. Luckily, one of our toddlers joined in, sat on my lap for most of it. Then I finished her stuff up, and she had a Zoom meeting with her virtual class right after. So did that. So 1:30 came, read the kids a story still. Because I just can't, you can't miss that out on them. Then I had them all go to the bathroom. I had them all lay down for nap.

Finally at 1:45 I was like, Oh, that was a long two and a half hours!

The impacts of COVID-19.

I would say it's pretty, it's definitely with COVID has been a lot more constant and a lot more stress and a lot more, but also a lot more connection with my colleagues. A lot of us have been reaching out randomly through the day, Hey, how's it going? Oh, I heard you had so and so - are they sick? Are you good? Is there anything I can help you with? So as far as that has gone, I feel like we really have strengthened those relationships and that we're really working to build something so much better because normally family child care is very isolated and we're kind of alone.

Because it is just us. We don't have another teacher down the street, we can go visit, down the hall that we can go talk to. Then this year in the summertime, a lot of us family child care we'll get together at the park and we'll do things together. So that's kind of our little bit of time too, to talk and that hasn't happened. So, a lot more with the social, you know, messengers, chatting, Zooms and things like that, just to kind of keep those connections and help each other get through every single day. So we don't quit.

So we got the support, the Cares Act money was reimbursement from March 12th through May 26th. I did get a PPP. So, that did help me get through the other time. But I spent that entire time advocating, like reaching out, connecting with colleagues, figuring out like what we're going to do and how we're going to get through this.

The biggest worry is keeping everybody safe because I can't control what the families are doing. I can't control where they're going. I have in my contract that they need to social distance and I am not going to weddings or any sort of gatherings like that myself, because if I brought it in, I just exposed the children in my care and their families. Then, most of them are volunteer firefighters, so that takes out the fire department! So, thinking about if I bring it in, I just exposed 40-50 people. I would be responsible for that. And I'm the type of person that takes that very seriously. If somebody brings it in, the families I have are really good families, so that was part of it too.

This summer, I only kept the families that I had and I really encouraged them just to come when they needed me. So, a lot of them were part-time and I would have four, five kids a day, which was great. Keep them a little bit more social distanced, kind of, get the routines in. But financially, it was not because I wasn't making enough to cover my bills. But I had that extra money that I used to pay myself for it.

Now is better because school has started and my kids that, like a couple of teacher's kids are back. So, I am back to being completely full. Now I have teacher's kids - they're in schools. Are they gonna end up, bringing it in and then what? If I get quarantined, I'm closed. Then what do those families do? If the kid, you know, they get quarantined, I don't have those kids. And it's really hard to charge full price for something you're not giving a service to, even though you need

the spot. They need the spot, they need you to be there when you get back, it's still just really hard when you feel like it's family too. It's a difficult spot to be in.

What is special about family child care?

I really emphasize that we are the backbone of our entire economy and our entire community and our entire society, no pressure, but it really is. It's care and education, education starts at birth. At this age, when you're with little ones, it's really that relationship. If you don't have a relationship with those children, they're not going to trust you or themselves enough to actually explore and learn and watch and learn from you and the others around them. I really emphasize family child care because you have all the different ages and by segregating them out into different ages, you're missing out on so many developmental opportunities for those kids. They learn by watching, they learn by doing. An infant watches, an older child, and they learn.

So it's kind of funny. People think that a child regresses when their two year old starts to crawl again, when their younger sibling is crawling. That two year old is teaching that younger child how to crawl. So I really thought, like watch that this year when I had an infant for the first time in awhile and she started to crawl and all of a sudden, my little two year old started to crawl around her, and she just sat and stared at them intently and was just watching them. They were playing with her and talking to her and they would only crawl when they were around her. But as soon as they saw her trying to crawl, boom, they'd get down and start crawling.

So, that's what these kids are missing out on when you segregate them by age and at family child care. I also will hit though, there's always a child who really close to them developmentally, whether it's just a head just below or just at their stage, and those two and three year olds watch those four and five-year-olds how they play and interact. Then that's how they know how to play and interact in good ways and positive ways.

So I also, when I'm talking to politicians a little bit more, I talk about how that those brain building years, literally those first few years, if there's any sort of trauma or any sort of like just not having a connection, any to any care provider, whether it's a parent, a neighbor, a grandparent, a child care provider or child care teacher in a center that that connection is what's needed to build those brains. So you're literally shrinking a brain if you don't have that with a child. That to me is so just disheartening because that just cuts them off and cuts off their opportunities.

The first five years you're learning those foundational skills. It's not your academic, it's your pre academic. You have to learn how to be curious. You have to learn how to think. You have to learn how to persist.

Like have you ever watched a kid try and learn how to do something? I had a, my little one and a half year old, two weeks ago, decided they were to learn how to go down the slide. So for an hour and a half, these two little kids, one wouldn't go up the slide, went up the steps like they

were supposed to, pull herself up with her arms and figure out how to sit on a slide, move her legs out of the way and go down. And the only one was climbing up this slide. That was his way of getting there. So, he's climbing up this slide and he would get to the top and turn around and go down, and these little one and a half year olds were sharing, were taking turns like, nope, they weren't yelling at each other one would do it. The other one would cheer him on and the other one would do it. The other one would cheer her on. It was just so exciting to watch, but how many places give an opportunity for a child to have an hour and a half to try and do a slide? And just that's what they wanted to do, even if I would have tried to redirect them, they would have been right back at that slide 'cause that's what they wanted to learn.

So really just talking about little stories like that and just, you know, those foundational skills that they need before they even can begin to read, sit down and listen or anything like that. And having my six and seven year old for my virtual has been kind of fun because they are really helping expand that, you know, play of my three and four or five year olds and just watching them and what they're coming up with is just been amazing. So, in some ways virtual has been kind of cool.

Little support for children with disabilities.

I had a child here with Rubinstein tay-bi syndrome. It's a joint and muscle type. And she could not take a bottle. It would take me two, three hours to give her an ounce of milk - of formula. And by myself, that was impossible. And I was like, this has, there's something's got to give. Luckily she was part-time, her grandparents took her two days, I had her two days, and mom had her one day. So that helped. If I would have had her five days, I don't think I would have been able to keep her. And that would've been really hard because I definitely feel every child deserves an opportunity and moms and dads shouldn't have to choose between work, and their child.

I was at the park with my kiddos and pushing one of them, pushing her, actually on the swing, and her, another group center, she just opened down the street, The Growing Tree. And she was there with her kids cause their playground hadn't been created yet. And she was pushing some kids on the swing. And, in between both of us working with our kid, we kind of started talking and she had a child that was older that had some significant special needs and really could have used an aid, and we're like, that's gotta be something.

So, we were talking about it and I contacted the county to ask and they said, nope, but they're not on Shares, there's nothing we can do. If she's on Shares, definitely we could get you an aid, and that would be full time, and we pay for it and I was like, well, what's the difference? Like, why did the parents have to be income-qualified for this child to get what they need? And I can't afford to hire somebody because I don't make enough to pay somebody else anything.

So, we saw that there was a town hall in New Glarus with our Senator Erpenbok, and our representative at the time was Janice Ringet. So, I thought I contacted her. I'm like, hey Brooke, you want to go to this? She was like, I don't know what we do. I'm like, I don't know, but let's just

go and we'll figure it out. So, I think if we had never done anything. We had been calling our licensors and DCF to kind of figure it out, and licensors and DCF just said, you shouldn't keep the kid. Like you can't, it's not the best you should just, you know, you should just expel them. And I was like, that's not an option. That's not okay. Yeah, so that was quite disheartening.

So we went to the town hall and they had, they did their spiel and then they asked if anybody had questions. I stood up and I told our story and Senator Erpenbach sent Kelly Becker over and she took our information. And within two weeks we were in his office having a conversation with DCF, which was pretty amazing. So he kind of created some monsters because he showed us what a representative is supposed to do. And so we DCF and met in his office. They basically said there's nothing, or there's lots of options. And I specifically said, well, what are they? Can you tell me? Well, it was a long time ago. Well, that didn't help me. Like, what do you mean, that there's nothing? And so they left, this was under the Walker administration.

They left the office and we looked at each other and we looked at Senator Erpenbach and he was like, okay, I guess we're going to start writing legislation. We're still writing the legislation six years later. They have pushed some things through - Medicaid is now fully funded, so that children's long term support system is now the kids aren't on the waiting list as long. So I was able to get an aid last year for her in the summer. It was \$15 a day, which wasn't enough to cover her aid - along that I took it. I did find out now though that I can get a lot more per hour because I actually am working on her IEP goals and things like that with her. So they'll pay me more per hour to pay somebody else. So I can do that.

That's what Medicaid would pay cause that's what I could pay somebody was \$15 a day. Didn't matter if she was there for 10 minutes or 10 hours - it was a day. So then I kept pushing back on that and contacted Poca's office, Baldwin's office, Dodson's office, Poca's office did get ahold of them. I must and push some things through a little bit faster. But then I did, like I said, I kept pushing it and questioning like, why is this per day? Why isn't this per hour? And then I said, this is what I'm doing with her, and then they were like, oh, well then you should get this instead. And I said okay, so I can get a lot more per hour - I think it's around 12 or 13 per hour instead. But right now I can't really - yeah, it's much better.

Becoming an advocate.

Brooke and I did some No Small Matter screenings together last year, and then we were going to do one in March in Bellville and that got canceled because of COVID. But then No Small Matter reached out to me because we've done several of them and had lots and lots of people come and had some really good turnout and they said, we're going to do some virtual. Would you like to try one? And I said, sure!

So we set it up and we did a virtual one within a week and a half, I want to say, and we had over 600 downloads across the state and we had 170 people show up at our YouTube conversation after. And then last I looked, like 500 people have watched it. That's kind of strange to me. So,

that's how we kind of got that going, and that morphed into this grassroots advocacy, group, Wisconsin, Early Childhood Action Needed (WECAN). And we've been putting together trainings and meetings and asking people what it is they want and what we should do together and how to make change because now under Evers Administration, Brooke and I did get a meeting with the new people in the same positions and that 30 minutes was just amazing.

They left and we looked at like, yes, finally, they seem to care. They get it. So that has been very, very good. Like there's still some things that we still like think DCF could do better and you know, just in general, but you know, it comes down to their constraints and our constraints and everything in between. And we have a lot of ground to make up basically, but I feel like it's going in the right direction and that they are truly listening to us instead of under the last administration when it was definitely, they did not care. They just didn't.

Steep declines in regulated programs.

Sixty-nine percent of us in family child care are gone since then, since 2010. And that was mostly under that last administration. So, the numbers kind of don't lie either. So that's kind of how we're doing the advocacy.

It's changed because now we're really pushing more for wages and we're pushing more for, for like stabilizing the field in general for all the kids along with still trying to get that behavior therapists and the mental health coordinators into our programs and helping us with those kids and the ability to hire somebody. But again, it goes back to wages.

So, family child care, we make less than minimum wage and we work at least 50 to 60 hours, usually 50 with kids. And if you're at a group center, most teachers and over 50% of us have at least an associate's degree, we make around \$10.54/hour. No benefits. That's no healthcare, no retirement, no, a lot don't even have paid holidays or paid vacation days if they do, it's only a few. Compare that to the average associates in the state at \$18 and some cents an hour with benefits. And the state has about 40%, people with at least an associates. So we're more educated than most non-degree holding type requirement jobs.

We are the lowest paid, degree holding. For sure. And then we're nine from the bottom for all across the States, and every one of them is, tipped. So they make more than us at the end of the day. The bottom. Of all the jobs in the entire state and we're ninth from the bottom for average wage. We're below dog walkers and crossing guards.

I would have made less than nothing [if committing to a long term special needs education]. So yeah, it would be a very, very poor business decision. Right. But yeah, we basically subsidized the industry because parents can't pay any more than they are. So, We are subsidizing by not taking the wages that we should have and that we deserve.

“We need to get louder!”

So, I've been meeting people from Superior, from Green Bay, from Door County, Milwaukee. So, that's been interesting and most of us really do feel the same way that we are a public good and we need to be invested in it as such.

A lot of us would like universal child care, but we're hesitant because we're scared of what that might turn into and making sure that we still have that autonomy to run our businesses as we know best and not have people that don't have a clue about child development then being the ones that make the rules.

So, really making sure that if we're going to go that route, it needs to be from birth, and it needs to be three and four year olds who are with us in our child care programs and not in the K-12 system - just because our buildings are created for those kids. Our teachers are experts in this area and having it in those buildings gives parents more choice because if you have it in the K-12 system, you have to be in your school district or open enroll where a lot of parents would rather have their child closer to where they work. They would rather have them closer to the aunt, or cousin, or grandma, or neighbor or whoever picks them up because of the hours.

The same thing, the K-12 system, you're looking at specific hours and you're looking at summers are still off. You still have holidays, you still have longer breaks. You have 180 days where they're at school. Well, there's still 185 days left in this in the year. So having that child care really meeting the needs of the families and the parents at that time, especially when you're looking at the relationships that you really should have. We see the parents every day before, when they drop off and pick up. You don't get that when a kid goes on a bus and goes to school. So, really making sure that whatever system we create is meant for kids and is the best for the kids.

We really need to change the way we prioritize things in general, in this country. We need to prioritize our children, our families, our communities, and each other, and that will then make everything else go smoother and better because if we invest in our kids and our families and our communities, then there'll be people who can get jobs. There'll be people that are happy. There'll be people who will then, you know, everything will just be able to change because that's what's important.

Everybody always says that's what's important, but when we look at how our country prioritizes things monetarily, our community and children and families are at the bottom, we invest so little in that, that we're one of the worst in the so-called developed world. That just is so disheartening because you're basically taking opportunity and you're taking what every person has to contribute and you're just stopping it and actually making you go backwards, and it just doesn't make sense to me.

So I just feel like there's a lot of us who agree with that and I feel like we need to get louder. I feel like every one of us matters and that we need to start acting like it and we need to start believing it and just one foot in front of the other and just keep going forward and we'll get there.

Connections to other providers.

It may be a place where a lot of us would just be able to kind of talk about anything. It could be like the little things like, hey, this contract, I'm having a hard time writing this little section up. Or, hey, I have a child I'm really concerned about. What can I do to kind of help or how do I talk to the parents about that? It would be, hey, I am stuck on lunches. I'm making the same thing every week. Do you have anything that's different, or paperwork? What do you use for your business paperwork? Or, observations with the quality rating indicator system.

We have all kinds of things there that we have questions about and just encouraging each other and helping each other. Because there's just so much misinformation out there where people are like, I can't be play-based and do YoungStar and I'm like, I have all the points and I have YoungStar, five star. I'm very play-based. So, this is how it works and just being able to just talk to each other.

I don't know if it would just be kind of like, especially with virtual now, if we would just have like a standing day - this week, this day - hop on if you can, and we can just chat kind of thing? Make it more informal, I would say? Just because there are days where nap times at two, not at one or you're exhausted at the end of the day and you're like, I can't get on another meeting, but if there was just blocks of time where there was just this open room that anybody wanted to go hang out in and talk about whatever would be fantastic.

Difficult to find time for self-care.

I'm not good at it. I will be the first to admit, I am terrible. Because I do definitely put myself last. I take care of my families and then my kids. My kids have called me out a couple of times. So, I'm trying really hard to turn it around and like, you're my kids, you are definitely my priority. Just making sure that I have time with them. We played games, we take walks.

We're fortunate, we have a cabin Up North that's about an hour and a half away, and we have gone there quite a bit and it has no internet. So, I can't take my work with me. So, that is definitely family time. I take books and I can actually just relax and read. So, like I said, I'm very blessed because we do have that. A lot of people don't, and I get that.

Especially being family child care, you're in your home slash business all the time. So, there's always that, I guess I could get that paperwork done that I need to get done, and you just kind of like are always on. You're always at work and it's really, really hard.

So if you have suggestions, I'd be all over it. Because like I said, I haven't been sleeping right. I'm trying to make sure I take walks. That's been helping. Now, we got a puppy cause I'm crazy. That's been helping cause I will take him for a 45 minute walk and listen to a podcast or just not listen to anything, and it's really just been good for me to get away and just kind of take that breather and break.

Because I am sleeping better now, but when everything hit in April, I was wide awake til 11, waking up randomly at one or two in the morning, not falling back asleep and then getting up at five o'clock in the morning. I've never ever in my entire life been a morning person! I was closed that 10 weeks and I still was up every day at five! It was terrible. So I'm finally now starting to sleep better. I think being outside all day with the kids helps because I'm getting a lot of fresh air. But, it's been hard, but really taking care of myself by reaching out and connecting with my colleagues and everybody that I can that gets it and understands it, has been helping a lot.