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Amanda: Today is Wednesday, November 24th, 2021. My name is Amanda Riegenbach and I am the manager for the Tumultuous 2020 Oral History Project at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. I'm currently in Pekin, Illinois with Carissa Bouse, Family Development Specialist with Family Corps in Peoria, Illinois. We're going to be talking about her experiences throughout the COVID-19 pandemic for Tumultuous 2020.

[0:00:28] Hi Carissa, thanks for meeting with us.

Carissa: Hi, thanks for having me.

Amanda: So we always like to start with the basics. When and where were you born?

Carissa: I was born in Danville, Illinois on December 2nd of 1995.

Amanda: Oh, so your birthday's coming up.

Carissa: Yes, next week, next Thursday.

Amanda: Wow, that probably came quick.

Carissa: It did.

Amanda: And do you have any siblings?

Carissa: Yes, I am the youngest of five.

Amanda: Wow, so are you the only girl?

[0:00:56]

Carissa: There is three boys and then my sister who did pass away when she was – she was only three or four months. She passed away of SIDS and then it's me.

Amanda: Well, I'm sorry for your family's loss.

Carissa: Thank you.

Amanda: And where did you go to high school?

Carissa: I went to Hobson High School, so I was a corn choker.

Amanda: That's an interesting mascot.

Carissa: Yeah, we make ESPN's like top ten weirdest mascots every year.

Amanda: That's amazing. And that's where you met your husband, is that right?

Carissa: Yes, I met him my sophomore year, his freshman year.

[0:01:26]

Amanda: Wow, so you're older.

Carissa: By 11 months.

Amanda: So much older.

Carissa: Yes.

Amanda: And did you guys start dating right away, or how did that happen?

Carissa: So actually, my mother-in-law is the one that set us up. She was really good friends with my best friend's mom. And so I had already – like, my eye was on him. Like, I thought he was so cute already. But he didn't even notice me. So then whenever his mom reached out to my best friend to get my number for him.

[0:01:55] Yeah, we were on and off through high school though, but by his senior year we were back – like we were together pretty serious and that was the last...

Amanda: And so what did you do after high school.

Carissa: I went to um Danville Area Community College for – it would have been two years. And then my husband joined the military and I just waitressed, worked some retail jobs. My dad got sick during that time so I was his main caretaker along with my mom.

[0:02:24] So it was just kind of part-time jobs that I could be in and out still go home and check on my dad. And then I moved to Arkansas after getting – I was actually married for six months before I moved to Arkansas. I stayed home with my mom and finished back. And then I moved to Arkansas. Same thing. Just kind of did some little jobs here and there I worked on the Air Force base. I waitressed, and then I went to University of Central Arkansas where I graduated.

[0:02:53]

Amanda: And what were you studying there?

Carissa: So I actually studied nutrition up until my senior year and then changed. I dropped my focus on nutrition and then just became a general family and consumer science major.

Amanda: What propelled you to this major?

Carissa: To nutrition or FACS?

Amanda: I guess first nutrition and then later FACS.

Carissa: So I think I was always very active in high school. I was a three-sport athlete. Very, just very active.

[0:03:21] And so I think the thought of nutrition to me was appealing because it was you work with athletes and things like – you can work with athletes, I guess. That's what I wanted to do with it. So that just seemed appealing to me and it just sounded fun. However, after actually going to school for it, in Arkansas they only have 16 internships in the entire state. It was in a class of about 40. When they asked who all was applying for the internship the next year, we all raised our hand.

[0:03:52] Most of them, all of them, were applying in other states. I couldn't move due to the fact that my husband was stationed there. So we were stuck there until they decided we were going somewhere else. And so I just didn't want to set myself up for failure by trying to get into those 16 spots. I know my GPA wasn't as good as others because I did work full time most of the time. And I had a very rough first couple of years in college.

[0:04:19] So I decided I would just drop my major. I really wanted to do radiation therapy but there was no one else in Arkansas that had that program aside from like it was two hours away from me and I would have to travel five days a week. So I just dropped my major and did FACS. I had no clue what I wanted to do with that. At one time my honor society did some volunteer work for CASA. And I went home and I told my husband that's exactly what I wanted to do because there was a story about a teenager who was placed in a foster home.

[0:04:50] And he started crying, and they're like what's wrong, and he's like I've never had a Christmas tree before. And like he couldn't he just couldn't grasp that the Christmas tree, the presents, those are for him. And so it was that moment I was like, I want to do that. I want to work with kids. I want to do something of that sort. But CASA is not as big in Arkansas in the area I was in. I couldn't find any jobs in it. I tried to get on at DHS. They call it DHS down in Arkansas I tried to get down on that.

[0:05:18] And that's just incredibly hard and so it just didn't happen.

Amanda: DHS, is that the...?

Carissa: Department of Human Services.

Amanda: Oh ok that's like their DCMS?

Carissa: Yeah.

Amanda: Ok, wow so you mentioned about radiation therapy. What was that that you wanted to do?

Carissa: So I lost my dad to cancer and so I just always thought if I could do radiation therapy, if I could help one person, that's changing the world for me. And so I remember the nurses they were always so nice to my dad.

[0:05:48] I mean they had a candy bowl out. My dad and my uncle were huge jokesters and they used to go and steal all the candy out of the candy bowl. And so every time they knew that they were coming they'd like put extra candy for my dad and my uncle to take. And they were just they were amazing to him and so I just always wanted to be that person. And if I ever go back to school it'll probably be for that.

Amanda: So it sounds like you've always been aware of the difference one person can make on a person's entire experience.

Carissa: Yeah.

Amanda: Very cool. So what kind of...

[0:06:17] Well I guess we'll start with going to the Peoria – or going into 2020. And I think you said it was around that time that your husband decided to leave the military?

Carissa: So he separated in July of 2020. We knew in 2019. We started planning out in advance because we knew we'd have to list our house. There's a lot of transitioning to going to it. He has to do the out processing.

[0:06:47] And there's just a lot involved. It's months of classes and debriefings and things like that that he had to do to even get out of the military. And so we knew we had to plan it in advance. So we knew by 2019 that he was getting out and so in early 2020 we were preparing for that move and starting the process of looking at areas and things.

Amanda: Is there a specific reason that you feel comfortable sharing?

Carissa: That he got out?

[0:07:17] So he, one night, was doing some physical therapy with some – or not physical therapy, I'm sorry, PT. He was doing PT with friends and doing the physical training and everything and they were playing a good game of basketball. And he went one way and his knee went the other. He tore his ACL, meniscus, another ligament, and fractured his leg. And so he had to have reconjunctive surgery. So he no longer has – his hamstring is wrapped around to be his ACL now.

[0:07:46] And so he has knee pain, and then the next year he tore his meniscus in his other knee. We're not sure how, it's just over time it was hurting and he went and sure enough he had tore his meniscus. So he's had two knee surgeries. Eventually they were going to force him out due to knees. So he got out on his own terms, but we don't have kids and that way he could go to school. We could manage with just the two, like with less of a career income, I guess, because he is working.

[0:08:17] He works full-time, but he's going to school, and he can focus more on that. And so, yeah, we just knew at some point he was gonna have to get out.

Amanda: That sounds insanely painful.

Carissa: Yeah, he's been told he'll need a knee replacement one day. So we knew, it was just time. And we were also... Our family's here, so we wanted to get closer to them.

Amanda: And remind me, what branch of the military?

Carissa: Air Force.

Amanda: Air Force, okay.

[0:08:43] And so it was July of 2020 and so kind of getting into that time, did you guys have any New Year's resolutions for 2020, big goals?

Carissa: Just to buy a house, move, and he would, he was already going to school at the time. He was only doing like one or two classes, so his goal was just to get in school, both of us get jobs, and find a place to live, that was our main goal.

[0:09:12] And sell our house. That was a big one.

Amanda: Did you have a specific region you were trying to get to?

Carissa: Bloomington area, actually.

Amanda: Oh, that's right, because he's going to ISU?

Carissa: He will go to ISU next fall, hopefully. As long as everything goes as planned, he'll go to ISU next fall. He's at Heartland right now.

Amanda: And so what did life look like for you guys in early 2020?

Carissa: I mean, normal, the early stage before COVID hit, it was completely normal.

[0:09:46] We were kind of soaking up a lot of the time with our friends there because we knew it was kind of coming to an end, so it was kind of bittersweet. There was a lot of last times we'd go to places. We would go and look at holiday

lights at the beginning of the year, and we knew it would be the last time there. So it was kind of bittersweet for us.

Amanda: What would a normal beginning look like for you guys? You know, where were you working at that time?

Carissa: So that time I worked at a child development center called Full Potential.

[0:10:17] It's a school where they take six weeks to six years. It's for kids with developmental delays who need some extra help, and so it's essentially like a preschool setting where the therapists come and get them from the class and they can do occupational physical speech therapy, all of that right there in the building. And so I was working there at the beginning of 2020. I was an early childhood development specialist. So what I did was I tested the children to see if they qualified for the school.

[0:10:48]

Amanda: Did that kind of fulfill what you had been looking for with CASA?

Carissa: Yes and no. I did the classroom side of it in 2019 and it was just a lot. I quickly learned I would not be a good teacher. But it was there was certain kids there who really, like, they just attached to your heart and they have a special place and I took to them. And I there was one little girl, I would always go braid her hair because her hair wasn't done.

[0:11:19] Or certain kids would bring hair supplies in and things like that But I did, I loved my job there and I'd probably still be there had me not moved.

Amanda: And is that the position that you were laid off from because of COVID?

Carissa: Yeah, I was laid off in middle of March.

Amanda: So that was still a little ways before you guys were planning your move.

Carissa: Yes.

Amanda: Did that cause a lot of stress?

[0:11:45]

Carissa: A lot. When I originally applied for unemployment, I was quoted that I'd get like \$200 a week. And panic set in really quick because we knew we would survive, but we also knew that we had a very short limited time with our friends and we wanted to be able to go and do and live our lives like we had normally done and enjoy the last couple months rather than stressing about income and thing like that.

[0:12:13] So I was very stressed and then they implemented the extra, it was at \$600 I think, and so I could quickly breathe. But yes, it did, getting laid off really, really stressed me out. However, I will say selling a house while not working is much easier, because I was home, so anytime they'd be like, hey, we have a showing in 30 minutes. OK, let me grab the dogs and we'll be out. It was so much easier. I could keep up with the house because having a clean house and then having a show house are two different types of cleans.

[0:12:44] I was cleaning my baseboards. I was cleaning everything. You had to mop daily. You had to wipe baseboards daily, windowsills, everything daily. And so it was kind of nice to be off during that time to show the house.

Amanda: I can imagine.

Carissa: And then my husband was working every other week. So he was also off a big chunk of time as well, because they went instead of working – seven days a week their shop was open, they had him on schedules.

[0:13:13] And so he was every other week. And so that was nice.

Amanda: Was that nice to get to spend time with him, then?

Carissa: Yes, and actually so his two best friends are also military, and my best friend there is a teacher. So she was off because the schools were shut down. His two best friends were on the same schedule. So it was really nice because then we were able to really spend time with them before we left. And I know everybody was supposed to be quarantining at the time, but we really kind of quarantined together. And we didn't go anywhere without each other, and so we were always there together.

[0:13:43] So it just made sense.

Amanda: They were kind of in that bubble.

Carissa: We were all in the same bubble. I mean, if I went to the grocery store, my best friend went to the grocery store with me. So, I mean, we did a lot of grocery pickup and things though. So. We were in none of us were around other friends or family. So if one of us was going to get it from somewhere, the other one was getting it from the same place.

Amanda: I can imagine it would be kind of lonely if it was just you and your husband.

Carissa: Yeah.

Amanda: Completely together, just alone.

Carissa: Yeah, it would have been.

Amanda: What's your husband's name, by the way?

[0:14:12]

Carissa: Chase. I'm sorry. Yeah, his name's Chase.

Amanda: And so in the early parts of 2020, in January and February, did you know much about the virus or anything about what could be?

Carissa: Honestly, I heard it briefly, didn't really pay attention to it until March. The very beginning of March is when it started really making talk around work. And so that's when I kind of learned more about it.

[0:14:39]

Amanda: Yeah, because I was going to say, it was January 30th that the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a public health emergency. And I mean, it wasn't until much later, though, in March that... you know, different states began to take different approaches and protocols. And so what were you thinking when you started hearing about it at work?

Carissa: So there was, there's a lot of different talk. It didn't stress me out until people were like, oh, I went to the grocery store and there was no food.

[0:15:11]

And I remember texting my husband, I'm like, we have to go to the store tonight. We have to get, we have to stock up. And he's like, we will be fine. Calm down. And so he kinda kept me grounded during that time because I'm not a – if I see someone panic, I panic. Like I'm a sympathy panicker. And so I don't know, if I see somebody panic, I panic. And people at work were like, I went to this store and there was nothing, I went to this store and there was nothing. So they were kinda all panicking. And so I started to panic, but other than that, I really just wasn't sure.

[0:15:39]

Because there was just so much talk about it, but there was no specific answers. So I really wasn't sure how serious or anything that it was gonna be.

Amanda: That seems to be the verdict of what I hear from people throughout these interviews is that, especially in February and January and early March, it was just uncertainty.

Carissa: Mm-hmm.

Amanda: So much uncertainty because nobody knew anything. Were you worried when you started hearing about it that there might be some impact with your husband being in the military or were you more relaxed knowing that he would be leaving soon?

[0:16:15]

Carissa: Honestly, no, there was no concern about him being in the military. It was more concern for my job because I knew no matter what he was working, like he had an income coming in. I was worried about mine and not having that income. And I know people are like, you know, you could have looked for another job. It's tough to get a job in March when you know you're moving in June.

[0:16:37] Not many people want to waste the time training you for four months. So that was kind of tough. So I was stuck between a rock and a hard place like do I even look for a new job or do we survive?

Amanda: Was there anything in particular that helped you make that decision?

Carissa: To what? I'm sorry.

Amanda: To just you know, try and get the house ready and focus on that versus a new job.

Carissa: The extra unemployment it was just like okay, this is the right thing. I'm not gonna waste somebody's time.

[0:17:09] It just seemed right to not also stress because selling a house was one of the most stressful things I've ever done. And so it just really kind of eased our minds. I was able, when it came time, I was able to pack and things like that.

Amanda: And so then in March, March 11th is when WHO declared COVID a pandemic and that's when the governor of Arkansas issued a disaster proclamation. And I was reading through – you know, I've been very well versed in Illinois' pandemic response, so it was really interesting to get to read through Arkansas in preparation for this.

[0:17:43] And I read one of his briefings where he discussed, you know, the lack of need for a stay-at-home order. Were you kind of aware of what was going on in these other states?

Carissa: So, yes, because I was actually on my way to Illinois to look at houses, and I think I made it an hour out when my realtor called me and was like, hey, they just issued a stay at home order. Like, I can't show you the houses.

[0:18:08] And so I was like, oh, OK. And so I just turned around and went home. Like, if I would have been farther, I would have still went and just saw my mom and kind of spent the weekend with my mom. But I was only an hour out, so I was like, it just makes more sense to turn around and go home. We'll try it again because, you know, it was only supposed to last two weeks. So we'll try it again in two weeks. We later found out that real estate is essential and

I still could have come. But it was for the better. We wouldn't have purchased one of those houses anyways. It wasn't the right timing for us. So yeah, and like I said, our parents are here.

[0:18:38] His grandparents are in Indiana. So we kind of got the gist from them.

Amanda: What was their response to what was happening?

Carissa: Kind of the same thing. They just didn't take it serious by any means. My mother-in-law was very cautious of germs and things like that. But it was more of uncertainty on how serious things like – thank gosh we've been blessed and we haven't had any major contact with it or issues.

[0:19:12] But I think that was just their thing is it didn't affect them really. Because their lives still continued, they still had to work, they still had to keep living.

Amanda: Absolutely. We were talking about, you know, that you were laid off and now kind of getting into that summer of end of 2020, were your original plans kind of interrupted or were you able to still, you know, enjoy that time with your friends?

[0:19:41] So thankfully we are big mountain biking people so that stuff doesn't shut down. Like what we do for fun doesn't shut down. So we were still able to do bonfires, mountain biking, enjoy the scenery and things like that. Hiking, it did interrupt our plans in the sense of moving because my husband was not allowed to leave the local area. So thankfully my father-in-law and my brother-in-law drove down to Arkansas, got our U-Haul and helped us drive everything back while Chase stayed behind.

[0:20:14] So Chase was living with a friend while I had to move here because I had a job lined up here that I had to start. And the plan was he was going to help us move and then drive back to finish out his two weeks there, because he had enough leave saved up that he got a month off at the end of his time. So from June to July, he was off. But that didn't happen because he had to stay in the local area.

[0:20:39] And Illinois was a hot spot at the time, so they definitely weren't going to allow him to come. And I mean, we asked, they tried to push it through, but they just said no, he just couldn't travel. So that interrupted our plans. Outside of that, it really didn't because we still, like I said, we went and did cookouts and bonfires and things at my brother's. Swimming parties. And just spent time, much needed time with our family that we haven't had in years. And we were only two hours away at this point, so most weekends we just drove to Hoepstead and spent the weekend there.

[0:21:12] How far away was the drive from Arkansas?

Carissa: Eight hours.

Amanda: So that's not a weekend trip.

Carissa: It was. We did it often. We would leave either super early Friday morning and then come home Sunday evening usually. So we did the weekend trip actually more often than not.

Amanda: So family is pretty important to you guys.

Carissa: They're everything. Yeah, we are very close to our family. So the weekend trips happened pretty frequently.

Amanda: So I imagine that with two hours it makes it really easy.

[0:21:42]

Carissa: Yes, much easier. And my mom, she doesn't like driving by herself often, so she comes over here all the time now. Because it's only two hours, and she'd only made the trip to Arkansas once by herself. So.

Amanda: Before we move fully away from Arkansas, one thing that I noticed while doing this research is that they're the natural state. So you mentioned there was a lot that you guys did outdoors and enjoying that type of...

Carissa: Yes, so I would highly recommend everybody, if you like to bike at all, go to Bentonville, Arkansas.

[0:22:15] That's where the original Walmart was from. The Waltons, they really put a lot of money into their community. And I think the last time we went there, we rode for like seven or eight hours. And I think we ended up riding 17 or 18 miles. Everywhere you look, there's just trails everywhere. And it is the fun, it's the most fun I've ever had. Hot Springs is also a very fun place to bike. Or Little Rock has Pinnacle Mountain, there's Petit Jean.

[0:22:45] Those are good hiking places. And so my best friend loves to hike. Chase hates hiking because of his knees. And Chase obviously does a lot more skilled biking than I do, so him and his best friend would go bike while me and my best friend would go hike. Our best friends are married, so it just always worked out. And then if not, we would all ride together, and we would just do like some easier trails. And it is a beautiful state in some parts.

[0:23:16] Some parts, it's not, but yeah, Hot Springs, Petit Jean, Bentonville, those are beautiful places.

Amanda: Very cool. And so, – oh, I'm getting choked up on my words. What month did you guys end up moving? Or you alone, I guess.

Carissa: I moved May 30th. I started work June 1st. Chase moved two weeks later. Yeah, so I was only alone two weeks, but.

[0:23:44] I ended up with a hospital visit and it should have been a second hospital visit. It ended up being an urgent care and I was told I did need stitches, but it was too late to get them. So I ended up with two hospital visits, essentially, in the two weeks I was home alone. And so we've quickly learned I can't survive on my own. Yeah.

Amanda: So what was that first one?

Carissa: I was walking my dogs and they saw a Great Dane. And so I tried to go around. Well, I stepped in a hole and they drug me across the yard.

[0:24:13] My ankle was huge. I already have ankle problems. I had surgery right after high school. And so it was the same ankle. And so thank God Chase's high school best friend lived in Bloomington. And so he drove over and got me and took me to the hospital and dropped me off. But because of COVID, he couldn't go in. So he just dropped me off at the door. He got me a wheelchair. I wheeled myself in and did everything. And then thankfully it was summer vacation, so Chase's two little brothers are off. And they drove over to Bloomington, sat out in the parking lot of the hospital.

[0:24:43] Why we didn't go to Peoria Hospital, I don't know. I still was not familiar with the area. I'd only been here two days at this point. So they took me to Bloomington. His brothers waited in the parking lot until I was done. Security wheeled me out and helped me in the car. And they came and babysat me for a week. They walked my dogs, got me my medicine, got me dinner, and took care of me. Yeah, it was not a good start to the move. And then two days in, my dog is an escape artist, so he has zip ties on his kennel because he knows how to break the kennel down while he's in it and escape.

[0:25:20] And so he had zip ties. We bought him a big special like steel bar kennel that he can't escape. And I was cutting the zip ties off and the scissors slipped and got me on the hand. And it was a very deep cut. And so, of course, my brother-in-law ran to Walmart to get Band-Aids, but he didn't have a mask, so he couldn't go in. So he ran to the gas station because they weren't making masks, like, they didn't require masks at this gas station.

[0:25:46] And he asked them if they had a couple of Band-Aids he could borrow or have. And so he brought them back. And so I got it to stop bleeding. And then the next day I went to CVS and I just got like Steri strips, like the butterfly strips, and I wrapped it myself. And about three days later, I went to urgent care. I'm like, can you guys like super glue this or something? And she's like, you needed stitches. And she's like, but glue doesn't stick well on the hands.

She's like, I'm just going to give you some better Steri-Strips. And she's like, you probably need a tetanus shot.

[0:26:12] But the tetanus shots that they had at the urgent care, the needle is made of latex, which is weird. I have a latex allergy, so they couldn't give me a tetanus shot. She's like, were the scissors clean? I'm like, well, yeah, they were my kitchen scissors. And so I just had Steri-Strips and then wrapped it up. And then after that, I was good. I didn't have any more injuries.

Amanda: Did you postpone your first day of work?

Carissa: So I had been to, I went to my first day. So my mom left me alone Sunday night.

[0:26:42] She had stayed the weekend helping me unpack. We got there Saturday. She stayed Saturday night and left Sunday night. I went to work Monday and I took the dogs to the dog park Monday night and it was on the way back. And so I did miss the second day of work and went the third. So yeah, not a very good impression but I couldn't go. I was in the ER until super late that night and I was on pain medicine. I couldn't drive and I needed it.

[0:27:11] By the second day I could go the day without taking it and then only take it at night. But yeah, so I did miss the second day of work.

Amanda: And how did you drive with a sprained ankle?

Carissa: With my left foot. So I was in a walking boot for a year and a half in high school. I have had serious ankle problems for years, so I'm very, very skilled at driving with my left foot. So I just did with my left foot until it was better that I could press with my right foot.

Amanda: And what was this job that you were in then?

[0:27:43]

Carissa: So I worked at an insurance company just for a month. It was not the right fit for me. So about two weeks in, three weeks in I would say, I quickly learned it was not for me, I was meant to do different things. And so that's when I started applying just to pretty much anything more related to what I wanted to do, and that's when I came across Family Corps.

Amanda: And it sounds like Family Corps was kind of a hidden blessing in a way, just because of your background with wanting to work with kids.

[0:28:22]

Carissa: And so I'd actually had interviews with CASA as well, so I was kind of holding out for CASA, but it was for a management position. I don't think it

would have been a good fit for me because I didn't have the experience that they needed. And so, yes, Family Corps was kind of a hidden blessing. I mean, it's had its times where I'm like, this is not for me. And then there's times that I did. I originally applied for the licensing position that I'm in now, the family development specialist.

[0:28:47] But they'd asked me to come in for an interview for the case work. And I got hired on for that and I did that from July to June.

Amanda: And that was something we focused a lot on in our pre-interview. You told me a little bit about the training, which looked very different for you than it would have in a more normal year.

Carissa: Yes.

[0:29:14] So usually for the CWEL training, to be a case worker or do anything with case work or social work, you have to get your CWEL license. And usually you go to Springfield for two weeks. And they put you up in a hotel, you stay there for the trainings. Well, I was on Zoom classes. And so I think I was the second one at the agency to experience the Zoom, so it was still a learning process. The people doing Zoom now, it's kind of like, hey, here's what you need.

[0:29:42] This is how it goes. But it was a very uncertain, like, what I was expecting.

Amanda: Do you learn well over Zoom?

Carissa: I mean, I don't think it really – I think I would learn better in a classroom because I'm not as comfortable, so I'm going to focus more. I did make an attempt that every morning I got up, I got dressed. Some people wore jammies, things like that.

[0:30:11] But I got dressed because I knew if I'm dressed, I'm going to focus more. But yeah, I would say I would learn better in a classroom.

Amanda: And what a bummer you didn't get to experience Springfield and Tull.

Carissa: Yeah, and well, based off of my experience living alone for two weeks, it probably was a blessing.

Amanda: Fair.

Carissa: Who knows what would happen.

Amanda: And what was that like then, transitioning from training into working?

[0:30:40]

Carissa: So before the training, I got to do a lot of shadowing. Like I got to go to court with a bunch of workers. I got to go to home visits. And so I kind of knew what to expect going in, actually going into the training. There were some people who had not been in the field at all. And so I kind of felt like I had a little bit more knowledge because I did get to experience that. I will tell you right now, casework is a very hands on job. And there's only certain things they can teach you in those trainings.

[0:31:05] So the transition, it was tough because they don't teach you about the emergencies and the quote unquote fires you have to put out on a daily basis. They don't teach you that. They teach you the basics, the procedures and all that and that stuff you have to know. But it's kind of a learn as you go field. Because there is every single case. Every single day is different. And there are different experiences that you have to just kind of roll with the punches on.

Amanda: It sounds like it can be very stressful.

[0:31:37]

Carissa: It can be, yes, but it's definitely worth it.

Amanda: And do you remember what your first cases were like?

Carissa: Yes and no. My first cases, a lot of those families, all of those families stuck with me my entire time there. And a lot of times cases get transitioned and things, but I kept my same families. I definitely got more families on the way, but my first couple families, they were kind of my babies because they were my first families I had.

[0:32:11] And I was able, because I just only had a smaller caseload than some workers at that time, that I was able to focus on them. I was really able to engage in them. And I think also I was a new worker, that I might have been doing too much for families at some point. I was doing things that probably weren't in my job title, like not inappropriate things, but it's like, hey, I need this paperwork, or I need this, I need you to find out this. Or I was like transporting kids more often than I should have. And I think it's just because I wanted to do my best.

[0:32:40] I wanted to make that impact. So those first couple families, they really have a special place in my heart. And they still do. And most of them have gone home, thankfully, those cases have closed. And that was really nice to to kind of be there for that. There's a couple of them I wasn't there for because they went home after I switched positions. But it's still like a lot of my kids, all of my kids actually I miss and I get to see some of them when they're like at the agency and we run up and do big hugs and things like that.

[0:33:08] Because I saw them for multiple times a week for a year. And so you get attached.

Amanda: Is that the norm kids going back home or does it tend to be more messy perhaps?

Carissa: I mean If their work is put in, yeah. That's always the goal. The goal from day one to the end is always reunification and we push and push and push and encourage as much as we can.

Amanda: And how did that look different because of the pandemic?

[0:33:40] You know, I mean, we talked about the way that parents or the biological parents weren't able to be in person with their children.

Carissa: It was definitely discouraging for them, so that's where we had to come in and really encourage them and push for them and remind them that they have to do everything that they can, that their kids love them. And then it was also the same thing reminding the kids, like, mommy and daddy are doing everything they can. They love you. They're pushing for you. And so it was a lot of encouragement because you have parents who are busting their butts.

[0:34:08] They are doing their services. They are pushing to get those kids home. And they don't feel like they're being rewarded because they're not getting to see their kids as much or it's over Zoom. And Zoom is better if you have older kids, but even then you can only do so much over Zoom. And so whenever you have an hour-long visit, sometimes you have parents who are like, hey, we can just end it early. They're getting bored, they're getting antsy. And so I would always try, like if we did a Zoom visit and it ended 30 minutes early, I would try to tack on an extra 30 minutes to their in-person because the time limit didn't matter.

[0:34:39] It just mattered, like, we had to do every other week in-person and not. So I would try to increase those visits on the days that we were in-person.

Amanda: So they were able to have a certain number of in-person visits?

Carissa: When I was there. I do not know if before they did it, like when COVID first hit like March of 2020, but by the time I got there, they were having in-person visits and then normally when I got there in July. And then by winter of 2020, we, DCFS, was kind of shutting back down again and pulling the reins back in and we went to every other week.

[0:35:15] One was in- person, one was in Zoom and that was tough. That was tough as a worker, that was tough as parents, kids, it was tough on everybody.

Amanda: I imagine that would be especially heartbreaking to listen to a parent say, okay we just ended early, you know, that designation.

Carissa: And so as soon as I would leave, because I did a lot of my Zoom visits, I would go sit at the kids house, we would use the computer and I would always make an attempt to call the parents and just encourage them after because it was hard to hear.

[0:35:46] We're here to encourage them, we're to push and COVID has been a real barrier or like with courts being shut down and like court being delayed like that was tough on everybody.

Amanda: What were the courts like?

Carissa: So they were being continued a lot. Then they went to Zoom only and that's tough because we weren't on those Zooms. It was just kind of judge and attorneys. So it was tough. People felt like they weren't getting the progress that they needed.

[0:36:14] And it wasn't anybody's fault. It really wasn't. It wasn't the parents. It wasn't the case workers. It wasn't the court. It's just unfortunately with COVID we had to do what we had to do and it was discouraging for a lot of people.

Amanda: And cases then in December of 2020, there was definitely a spike when you look at some of the numbers. And you said that's kind of when DCFS started reining in again?

[0:36:46]

Carissa: Yeah, I don't know the exact timeline. I probably should have looked through my emails to get that for you. I'm sorry. We weren't allowed in the office, but at one point we had AB schedules. So most offices have four desks. And so if you were diagonal from a person you were allowed to be there that day. But if your desk was next to each other, you couldn't be in the same day. So we had AB schedules and they had that scheduled out for us.

[0:37:14] And then once they started vamping up more, it went to, we have teams inside the agency, you have a supervisor and they have their team. Each team was allowed one day in the office and you were allowed two hours and you had to schedule that. But you had to be out before the next person came in. And so it was kind of like that for a while and then we kind of went back to the AB schedule. And it just kind of slowly faded to where everybody was just kind of, okay we have to be in the office.

[0:37:41] You can do some things from home but you really do need the office. And so that was tough.

Amanda: And then I imagine it's even harder because they probably don't have the resources to give everyone a phone to have at home.

Carissa: We all used personal phones. I used, personally, I used a Google Voice because you can turn it on and off. And that way I could still have a work life and a home life.

[0:38:10] You have to have that balance. I wasn't always the best at it. My husband will tell you that. Chase will be the first one to tell you I was not the best with my work life balance. Because if my phone rang I was like, oh my gosh, what if it's an emergency? What if they need something? I have to answer. And so that, I wasn't the best with it. But they did. Yeah, most people use Google Voices or apps and things like that. Some people did the Star 69 and hid the phone numbers when they called. That's all fine and dandy. If you call our office numbers and you leave a voicemail, it sends the voicemail to our email.

[0:38:41] So we were thankful we were able to get our voicemails off of our work phone. So that was always kind of nice.

Amanda: Absolutely. I imagine if not, you probably just couldn't really do anything.

Carissa: Yeah. You would never know. You'd miss so much.

Amanda: So do you get a lot of calls? Or did you get a lot of calls at that time?

Carissa: Yes, I used to get calls at all hours. And that's where I had to learn. I had to silence it. I used to get calls on weekends and I get calls at the office on weekends and that's fine.

[0:39:10] We have a Monday through Friday schedule but it's not a Monday through Friday job. It's just not. It's unfortunately a 24-7 job and you have to kind of be always essentially on call for certain things. We do have an on-call phone at our agency but everybody's kind of quote-unquote on-call at some point.

Amanda: How many hours were you usually working a week?

Carissa: So it varied each week.

[0:39:39] Some weeks I would get out with 40, some weeks it was 50. Depending on the month or what was going on, sometimes I could push closer to 60. I tried to not to do that. At the beginning, I was really bad with it. I was really bad about working more hours, because I just felt like I wasn't doing enough. But Family Corps is really good about preaching self-care. So that is one thing that they do push for self-care. They push, they encourage us to stop working at home.

[0:40:12] Our supervisors and our directors are great about that. They're great about, like if you email them late, they're like get off work, like go enjoy your time. And so they are really good about that, but it is a stressful job. And that's not just Family Corps, it's gonna be every agency. Everybody works crazy hours.

Amanda: It's kind of the field, isn't it?

Carissa: Yeah, and we're blessed because we have flex hours, because you have to see the kids. Well, they're in school from 9 to 3.

[0:40:40] Or I'm not sure exactly what the school hours are, but general hours. You have foster parents who work until 5, 6 o'clock. So you can't see them until they're home. And so that's kind of where it comes in, like, okay, sometimes, like, if I know I had to work until 8, I might not go until 10 or 11 that morning. Or if I know, like, hey, like, several times it was, hey, I've worked. I'm at my 40 hours by Thursday. I'm taking Friday off and we're going out of town or something. And so it's kind of nice that we have that opportunity.

[0:41:08] Obviously taking a whole day off is not very feasible, but you do. You can flex your hours. But it's a very fast-paced job and there's a lot to do. So you do work a lot of hours.

Amanda: And you talked about some of that in and out of the office. When you started in – was it July?

Carissa: Mm-hmm.

Amanda: Were you able to be in the office at that point?

[0:41:37]

Carissa: Yes, we were in the office for several months. It was a little after – I want to say closer to October, maybe? October, November when we started going – well, it would have been October, November because we were still in our apartment. We had not moved to our house yet, and we went to the A-B schedule. By the time we'd moved to our house, we were still on the AB and then we pretty much went to straight remote. The two hours that lasted through, I want to say through December maybe.

[0:42:08]

Amanda: And during this whole time while you're in this new position, did Chase start school in August?

Carissa: Yes, so we actually both – he started work in July as well. We actually got offers the same day. I got my offer from Family Corps and then he got his offer from his job. He started school in August, so he was very busy. He

worked full time, he was in school. And so we were both like kind of go, go, go, just trying to fall back in the swing of our new life and find what our normal is here.

[0:42:43]

Amanda: And fall of 2020, I think you said you started at Heartland. I know a lot of the community colleges were mostly online.

Carissa: He was all online. That was concerning due to he does have the VA benefits and things like that. There was a lot of uncertainty with that because they do require you to be in person. So there was a lot of coming up with the new normal for the guidelines and things like that.

[0:43:11] That was another stressor for us. Thankfully, the VA helped out everybody. So that was kind of nice that they were able to figure that out. But yes, he was all online. Actually through May of 2021 he was online the entire time.

Amanda: Was that a difficult transition for him going from full time military to full time work and online school?

Carissa: So he did a couple of classes.

[0:43:42] I think just getting back into school after being out for five years, five, six years. It was five at the time. Actually being out for five years, that was the biggest like – just wrapping his brain around that. The first semester he really had to try to get back in the groove of things, but by second semester he killed it. So it was a lot of transition for him. We had to find our balance where he was working five days a week and we had to really sit down and think like, okay, like that's not feasible.

[0:44:11] You can't work five days and do online. He was doing, he was waking up, going to school, sitting on his computer until it was time to go to bed. And it just wasn't possible. So he ended up working it out to where he took one day off for nothing but homework. And it's kind of stuck, and it's really working for him. So yeah, it was tough for him.

Amanda: I don't doubt it. And I think then he'll have this semester and then spring, and then he'll be going to ISU, then?

Carissa: He has one summer class, and then he will.

[0:44:39] So he'll be applying for ISU fairly soon.

Amanda: And hopefully, he'll be able to be in person for that.

Carissa: He's in person this semester and next. So he only goes to campus twice. And then next semester, I think it's the same thing, he goes to campus twice a week.

Amanda: And then around this time in November of 2020 is when you guys found your house.

Carissa: Yes, we thankfully bought right before the market took off. We did get affected though by it.

[0:45:09] So we'd originally started looking in July, but we wanted to get better solid incomes and kind of get familiar with the area, which I'm very thankful we did. So we started looking in September. Our lease was up in November, and so we knew we needed to look. And so we looked at what – we had found a house. They listed it on a Friday. And our realtor called immediately to set up a showing on Saturday, and they're like, we have family in town, we have a birthday party, we're not doing any showings until Monday.

[0:45:41] My realtor was a family friend at the time, and so she lives two hours away. She was just kind of doing us a favor, like helping us out. And she was like, I can get over there Tuesday night. I'm like, that's fine, that works. Monday, about 10, 11 o'clock, she calls me. She received an email saying that they canceled our showing. So they had accepted an offer. Pretty sure it was Chase's dream home.

[0:46:05] Looking back now, if we could have put that house in our location here, we would have been happier, because it was in a very busy area, and neither of us are busy kind of people. So I don't know, we loved the house but just not the area. We could have definitely lived there and been fine with it. We just didn't love the area. And then we found a handful of houses. We came and looked. This was the first one we looked at.

[0:46:33] And we hadn't put an offer. We were going to think about it. And my realtor texted me and was like, hey, just a heads up, they have someone coming to look at it tomorrow or something. And I'm like, screw it, put an offer in. So we put our offer in and they accepted it by the next day. So that was kind of nice. I don't know if they actually had an offer or somebody coming to look or if it was just to scare us, but it worked. And so we put the offer in and they accepted it the next day.

[0:47:01] And from there, it was a very fast pace, trying to get everything done. And there was a lot of issues with the process. I won't even get into that for you though, because it's a lot. But we had a lot of issues. And finally, though, once we were able to close, it was just kind of like a relief. And we were just glad to be back in a house, out of an apartment with our dogs. They have a

backyard now. And so we were very thankful, though, that it was right before the market took off, because I couldn't imagine buying a house.

[0:47:33]

Amanda: Your apartment, was it in Bloomington?

Carissa: It was in Morton. So yeah, not very far. It was in Morton. We're very thankful for them. They let us have our three dogs. Most people wouldn't. But we just, we needed a house.

Amanda: And so, did you have a better support system helping you move this time around?

Carissa: So, we think, we've had a, every time we've moved we've had a great support system.

[0:48:01] We really do have great family and friends. We moved twice in Arkansas. We moved from an apartment to a house. And then once we sold our house, to our buddy's house and then his family brought me here. And then his family helped move us here too. I mean, my mother-in-law, she's amazing. So we loaded the U-Haul on Friday, unloaded it Friday night. Unpacked everything Saturday, hung all the decor up on Sunday. So Sunday night when I went to bed, my house was completely clean, unpacked, decor on the walls.

[0:48:32] Everything settled in and we just were able to relax and watch a movie knowing we had to go to work tomorrow the next day. And we didn't have to walk around boxes. Everything was unpacked. So, yeah, it was very nice. It was amazing.

Amanda: That is amazing.

Carissa: It was very helpful. So, yeah, it was, took a lot of stress off us.

Amanda: Do you think there were elements of the process of buying a house, the insanity of some of those aspects you mentioned, was that in part due to the pandemic?

[0:49:07] Not necessarily because of the pandemic, but because of the effects of it?

Carissa: No. They were just other issues. I will say, it just seemed like if it could go wrong, it did. At one point, like, the two days before I move, the moving truck company called me. Somebody cut all the catalytic converters off every moving truck they had. And so we had no moving truck.

[0:49:30] And so at that point, I was just like – at this point, I was like, okay, if it's gonna go wrong, it will. We closed on Friday the 13th. So I knew, like, going in, I'm like, this is not gonna be good. But yeah, so she's like trying to talk to

me, apologize. I'm like, ma'am, I appreciate your apologies, but if you're calling everybody, I need to get off of here to hurry up and call another truck company before they all get booked up. Like, I have to have a truck. So please, like...

[0:49:55] And then before that, they called and told me that they didn't have the truck that I ordered, like I had reserved. They didn't have it. So I was like, okay, they were going to give me a smaller truck and then just not charge us mileage because we were going to have to make two trips with it. And then they called me back and they're like, hey, we don't even have any trucks. And I'm like, okay, that's fine. Like, goodbye. I'm going to go call and reserve another one with another company. But yeah, so it was just kind of like if it could go wrong, it would. Like up to the point that like, I think it was the truth of the night before we weren't even sure that we were going to be able to close.

[0:50:30] Not something on our end. Like, there was issues with the process, inspection, timing, things like that. And then it was the bank said, oh, well, we can't close Friday, we can close Monday. And we're like, no, like we have everything lined up for Friday. We can't wait till Monday. And apparently they only allow so many people to close on one day at a bank. I'm not sure. I don't know the process. I don't work at a bank. But it was like something about they'd already had their amount that they were going to allow to close.

[0:50:59] And so they just essentially like, done. And I was like, well, what would happen if like we wouldn't have had these issues? I was just very confused. Why did we schedule it that day if we couldn't? And so it just was staying after. And it wasn't anything to do with the pandemic. I just think it was unfortunate luck.

Amanda: Yeah, it sounds like it.

Carissa: Yeah, it was it was rough.

Amanda: But you have a beautiful home.

[0:51:26]

Carissa: Thank you. Yeah, it's. We've actually painted and we've still got a ton of painting left because it needed a good paint job.

Amanda: Are you guys a bit of a perfectionist?

Carissa: So Chase painted for a living in the Air Force. So he is a very perfectionist when it comes to his paint. But the walls were green. Green and bright yellow. Our bathroom was bright yellow. We still actually have a pink and green wall in the guest room. So yeah, the kitchen's yellow too. It's got to go.

[0:51:55] And I mean, if you like green and you like pink and yellow, that's fine. I'm more of a neutral person. So we went from a very neutral house to this. And it was like, wait a second, this isn't, no. And so it was very dark in here. So the beige kind of made it lighter and the white. And so it just needed our little touch.

Amanda: To make it home.

Carissa: Yeah.

Amanda: And so kind of going in line with kind of the chronological order of this interview, you know, from November then to December, that's when the first vaccines became available, but they were only available to health care workers, long-term care, facility staff, and residents.

[0:52:34] And that kind of brings us back to focus of the pandemic. Did it feel like it was affecting you guys at that point? Or was it really just kind of like something you just heard in the news?

Carissa: By December? I hate to say it because I, we are very fortunate and I don't want anybody to take it any other way. It didn't really affect us much.

[0:52:57] I mean, when we sold our house it affected us because we couldn't have an open house and nobody really wanted to go into somebody else's house at that time so getting showings was kind of hard. And then going out somewhere because you can't go to a restaurant or anything because everything was kind of like shut down at the time. So I mean that's the only thing that's really affected us and then obviously Chase's schooling and stuff. But by that time it really was still just kind of something we heard in the news. It really wasn't affecting us personally. I mean it was affecting my job but I still worked.

[0:53:25] I still had to do my job. It just kind of threw a wrench in things on how I did it. It just kind of changed that way. Chase still had to go to school. Chase still had to go to work. So it was essentially just kind of something we heard in the news. I'm not a big news person anyways so it was kind of more something that people just told us. Like we heard in passing things like that.

Amanda: We'll just note that this is an oral history where it's your perspective, so don't worry about saying something.

[0:53:55]

Carissa: I know. We've been very fortunate, and I do agree. Some people, they've had it very rough with this, and my heart hurts for them. But we've been very, very blessed that it's not affected us in a huge way.

Amanda: And that's good to hear.

Carissa: Yeah. We're very thankful.

Amanda: So, then I imagine then, for some people who were very concerned about the pandemic, the vaccines coming out was, you know, a sign of hope, but for some people it was kind of a sign of caution. Did you experience either one of those?

[0:54:25] Or really was it not much of a reaction at all?

Carissa: Not much of a reaction. My mom works at a hospital. She's not around people though. She really sits in a tiny office by herself. So, it really wasn't much of a reaction for us.

Amanda: And so then kind of from December 15th then to Christmas time, were you guys able to have a normal Christmas?

Carissa: We did, yeah. Yeah it was it was normal.

[0:54:56] We celebrated at my brother's. We were able to get together with my in-laws. So, yeah, I mean it was it was just a normal Christmas.

Amanda: And I'm sure it was nice not having to make an eight-hour drive.

Carissa: Oh, it was so nice. It was so nice, like, knowing that it was like two hours there, two hours back. It made it a little bit more relaxing. Knowing that we weren't in the car for eight hours the next day. So yeah, it was very nice.

Amanda: And so I imagine you were able to extend your stay.

Carissa: We didn't. Usually if we came home for Christmas, it was for three to four days.

[0:55:29] My husband's family celebrates on Christmas Eve. My family does Christmas Day. We actually lost my dad Christmas Day. So Christmas Day means a lot more to my family in a different way. So we definitely spend the entire day together. But it was nice because we always kind of had to be cautious of what presents we were buying people. And our family had to be cautious of what presents they were buying us because we had three dogs and we had to drive eight hours. So sometimes if it was a bigger gift, it got left.

[0:55:59] And we didn't get to enjoy it until the next trip if we found a dog sitter or if somebody was coming to see us. So it was kind of nice. We actually took two vehicles to Christmas and we'll do the same thing this year because it's just easier. Like Chase takes the little dog, I take the two big dogs, and then he will put the gifts in his car or vice versa, whatever, or his truck, whatever works. And so it's just easier now that we can buy big gifts for people. They

can buy us bigger gifts. And it's always like playing Tetris, trying to get our gifts in the car on the way home, and it was just a nightmare.

[0:56:32]

Amanda: That's wonderful to hear.

Carissa: Yeah, it's a lot better being closer.

Amanda: And then in Christmas of 2020, if I remember correctly, in our pre-interview, you actually got a call from your work in the middle of Christmas dinner, was it?

Carissa: Yeah, which kind of leads to the, there is no time off for the job. Like, it is a very big job. I did not answer. Because we don't always answer, and because Christmas does mean something different to my family, we, I didn't answer.

[0:57:02] I just returned that call the next day. But yeah, you definitely, like I said, you get calls all the time.

Amanda: And was that kind of the moment you realized you needed to make a change with where you were at?

Carissa: So, it was not necessarily that moment. There was a lot of things leading up to that my body just couldn't handle the stress. Some people are amazing at it. They really are. I just wasn't one of those people. I mean, I was good at my job, don't get me wrong. I pushed and I tried, but I just wasn't good at managing the stress.

[0:57:33] My teeth started hurting, and so I went to the dentist because I thought I had a cavity. He said, no, you're clenching your teeth too much from stress. So I was causing myself physical harm. I'm a big snacker. I love candy, and I couldn't eat candy. I couldn't eat it without feeling like I was having like stabbing pain in my teeth. And so I was like, I gotta stop, like something's got to change. And so it was, we were, say maybe the end of December, early January, we were on a all staff meeting.

[0:58:03] So all the child welfare was on there, and they mentioned that there was a position open in the licensing department. So I quickly messaged the girl who works in licensing, and I was like, tell me about it. Like, please tell me about the position, talk to me about it, and she's like, you would love it. Come on. And so I immediately emailed the director and the licensing supervisor, and I was like, I would love to interview for this position, please consider me. Like, so they immediately scheduled an interview, and I was actually hired for the position in January.

[0:58:31] I didn't make the transition until June, but I was hired in January, and so it was kind of like the light at the end of the tunnel, though, enough to keep pushing.

Amanda: So that distance between your hiring date and your start date seems to be very indicative of what you were going through as a social worker.

Carissa: Yeah, and unfortunately, like, obviously if I was to quit and put my two weeks in, or a month, or whatever notice I gave, and then went to a different agency or something like that, it would be a shorter time.

[0:59:04] But when you transfer inside an agency, you have to hire somebody to take your spot. And those families, they had to have a worker, and so it was me, until we hired somebody to take my caseload. And so that's kind of the whole reasoning it took so long. And I just think it was, as much as you hire somebody to take those cases, more cases come in. So it's like, does the new worker get the new cases or...?

[0:59:30] And so it just kind of took hiring several new people for me to be able to transition.

Amanda: And by January, that's when the vaccine became more available to frontline essential workers and Illinoisians 65 years old and up. And then by April, that's when the vaccine was available to all Illinoisans age 16 and up. And that started the process of things starting to open up again.

[1:00:00] Did you notice that in your work? Were you allowed then to be in the office more or did that happen earlier?

Carissa: I think it kind of happened earlier. I think more people started coming into the office as they felt a little bit more comfortable. But I really think before that is when we started opening up more. Definitely once the vaccine became that came available, the mask mandate went down and all of that later on. And that changed like how like if you were vaccinated.

[1:00:31] You don't have to wear a mask. And but other than that, like we're still kind of very virtual on things. Any kind of thing that we did, it was very covid friendly and we still did a lot of virtual meetings.

Amanda: What were your thoughts on the vaccine at that time?

Carissa: My thought on the vaccine at that time was if somebody felt comfortable getting it, that is 100% their right and I feel that they should. If they are comfortable and that is their opinion and they want it, then who am I to tell them that they can't?

[1:01:02] But I'm also the same way, if somebody is not comfortable, who am I to tell them that they have to get it?

Amanda: And have your thoughts on the vaccine changed since then?

Carissa: No, they haven't. No, I still feel that if you want it, you should get it. Absolutely, I encourage it. I think if you have underlying conditions or you are older, then absolutely, if you think that is going to benefit you, you should. Even if you're younger and you want to get it. That is 100% your right and I am thankful that we have that right.

[1:01:30] And I'm also the same way, if you don't want to get it, I'm thankful that we have that right to not get it.

Amanda: And where do you fall between those?

Carissa: We are not vaccinated. And I don't see that changing any time. However, we stay open minded. We consider it. We keep looking at the things. My husband's doctor said it best. It's kind of just waiting and watching right now. The world is all uncertain. So we're just kind of watching at this point.

Amanda: And that seems to be a lot of what the CDC has recommended is talking to your medical professionals, those people that you trust and they've given you good advice as to what you think is best for you, it sounds like.

[1:02:07] And as the vaccine became more widely available, the mask you mentioned earlier was a kind of foregone for people who were vaccinated. That was in May. And then in June, Illinois moved into phase five. You know, did things start to feel like on that level they were more normal?

[1:02:34]

Carissa: Yes, definitely. We were able to kind of go more and do more and not feel like everybody was – I felt like everybody was kind of avoiding everybody for a while and just keeping their distance. And I just kind of felt like things were kind of normal. People were a little bit more relaxed.

Amanda: Kind of like a breath of air.

Carissa: Yeah. Yeah, it was just kind of nice.

Amanda: And how did things change in terms of, you know, your work?

[1:03:04] You mentioned that parents were able to visit every other week in person at some points. Did this mean that parents were able to visit every week in person?

Carissa: They went back to every week in person pretty quickly. I don't remember the exact timeline, but that thankfully didn't last for too long. DCFS did. Like, they watched the numbers, and once they felt that it was safe, they did go back to all in person. So thankfully it didn't last too long. Other than that, it did affect our work just by if you were vaccinated, you didn't have to wear your mask.

[1:03:33] We don't have to wear them at our desks because thankfully my office, my desks are spread apart. You still have to wear them though if you're walking around, things like that. We were able to have our first in person meeting and that was wonderful to finally see people because there were people I hadn't even met yet.

Amanda: Yeah, so I mean around this time you've been there for a year and that was the first time you had a meeting so big that you...

Carissa: When I first started, we were having a couple in-person meetings.

[1:04:04] Everybody was masked and there was some in-person, but for a while it was mainly kind of virtual. And we did smaller in-person meetings, but it wasn't the whole child welfare department. It was a while before we had the whole child welfare department. And we actually did a big lunch, like a stress reducer lunch. We do those often, thankfully, where we all just get together, we get to have lunch, we color, we talk about everything about work for just a short little period of time.

[1:04:33] Just a nice stress relief lunch. And so I think, I want to say that might have been the first in-person meeting we were able to do.

Amanda: Wow.

Carissa: Yeah, it was a while though without them. We did a lot of Zoom and Teams.

Amanda: And so I know that for some people it's hard to remember faces, you know, when you meet someone only online. Was that kind of weird to finally meet some people and think, oh, I know you, but I've never seen you?

[1:05:02]

Carissa: So, you see people in passing. Our building's not very big, you see people in passing. But it's kind of weird to see people for the first time without their mask. Like, that was a big thing. Like, I think I'd been there for months before some people are like, oh my gosh, that's the first time I've seen your mouth. And so it was kind of funny just to see that, like the reaction, because all you see is nose up. And so I think that was like the bigger thing, was seeing people without masks. It's like, oh, so that's what you look like.

Amanda: And were the courts in person at that point?

[1:05:34]

Carissa: I'm trying to think. I think there was a time period where they were not in person at all, aside from your bigger court hearings. So you have different court hearings. You have your adjudication, your dispo, your permanency, your best interest, things like that. So the bigger ones that do more decision-making, like your adjudication, your dispo, best interest, things like that, you're in person. There were sometimes like where the court was like, no, this one has to be in person because we're making big decisions at this one.

[1:06:05] But if it was just like a status, just to see where we're at in the case, those were in the permanencies, those were mainly on Zoom. And it was kind of wishy-washy on who was allowed on. Most of the time it's just the judge and the attorneys. Sometimes you could request to be on. It was just kind of different. But you cross that bridge of juvenile cases are very confidential. And so if it's a Zoom, you cross the bridge of who's all in the room, who's all going to hear this case?

[1:06:36] And so there was a lot of uncertainty with that too, because confidentiality is our main thing. And so that was kind of where the court fell on the Zoom was. It's hard to have confidentiality over Zoom.

Amanda: Was there ever issue of people not having access to Internet or access to devices that could stream it?

Carissa: Not that I ran across, I'm sure somewhere, yes.

[1:07:06] I know there were some times that people would come – like, there's ways around it. People could come to your agency and like that. I never had to do that, thankfully, but I'm sure somewhere somebody has.

Amanda: And then we talked about June was a little bit moving into phase five and then June was also when you transitioned to your new role.

Carissa: Yes.

[1:07:34]

Amanda: What was that like?

Carissa: So it was a breath of fresh air. It really wasn't any different. Casework was pretty open at that point. Licensing was pretty open. So there really wasn't much much difference. A lot of just shadowing on that one. My training again was well, it's like a couple short trainings and a test. It was again on Zoom when it probably used to be in person.

[1:08:05] So that was over Zoom. It wasn't terrible though because that's kind of a lot of self-taught, like you read the standards, things like that. It's not like the CWEL where you have two weeks of Zoom. So that wasn't quite as difficult transitioning.

Amanda: That's always good to hear.

Carissa: Yeah.

Amanda: And tell me more about that role as a licensing... Oh no, that's what I wrote down, not licensing.

Carissa: We're a licensing worker. It's a family development specialist, like the technical title.

[1:08:36] So what I do is when a child comes into care, I focus mainly on relative placements. We have a recruiter who focuses on traditional. When a child comes into care and they're placed with a relative, it's my job to get that relative licensed as a foster parent. So I go in and I go through the paperwork. I help them get their physicals and fingerprints and things like that. I help them get into the training. I do the home safety check. I check to make sure their home is in compliance.

[1:09:01] And then we also deal with placements. So if a child needs a placement, we are the ones that call and find that placement for the most part. Like, so that's when we'll call our traditional homes and say like, hey we have this child who needs a placement and that is our job to get that child there. Or not to get the child there, but to get that child home and then the caseworker kind of takes over from there with getting times and actually getting the child there.

Amanda: Is this job a 24/7 position as well? Not officially, of course, but...

[1:09:34]

Carissa: It's definitely a lot less time. I don't want to say time consuming, because it is. I mean, there's a lot to do still. Your foster parents call the on-call phone more often. We are the on-call, so we switch each week. Somebody has the on-call phone. So yes, at that point it is, and we try to help each other. So if somebody's on-call and they're like, hey, any advice on this?

[1:10:04] We'll try to help each other. But it's not as much, like, I don't have a foster parent calling my cell phone at 4 a.m. But I also don't have to utilize my cell phone nearly as much, and I communicate through email and my office phone now. And so this position allowed me to kind of do that. I mean, I went on vacation in May, and when I went, I deleted my Google Voice and deleted my email off my phone to get that transition. And it wasn't up until

just recently that I redownloaded both, only because it is nice if you are out in front of somebody's house and they're not there, you can call them and say like, hey, we had a visit or a scheduled time, what's going on?

[1:10:43] And you can kind of get that. So I do have that, but nobody really contacts me from there. Foster parents mainly contact the on-call or the office phone. And so that's nice.

Amanda: That must be quite a relief.

Carissa: Yes, it's definitely much different.

Amanda: And I know you mentioned that it was partly Chase who was getting worried about you when you were a social worker.

[1:11:04]

Carissa: He wanted me to have that work-life balance for myself. And that was definitely something that he pushed because he saw how I was bringing it home with me. I wasn't wearing the stress well. I was struggling and he saw that and so he encouraged it. And when I mentioned that the licensing position was open, he was like, you need to go for it, like, do it. And he just kept pushing. He's like, ask them, like, throughout those, like, January to June, he kept saying, like, ask them when you're moving, ask them when you're moving. Like, he stayed on me to stay on it because had I not, I probably would have still be there.

[1:11:39] Like, I had to push and push and it's not because they didn't want to move me. It's because it's hard to move somebody in an agency.

Amanda: And is that sometimes difficult that there's not someone really to be mad at? It's just the way that it's set up?

Carissa: Yes, all the time. All the time. It's like you want to blame somebody but there's not anybody to blame. It's just the nature of the job.

[1:12:04] It's nobody's fault. We want to blame the agency. We want to blame the state. You can't. You can't blame anybody. It's the nature of the job and we signed up for it.

Amanda: And then in July is when the Delta variant started to become more prevalent, especially in Illinois. And that's when the CDC began to recommend masks for the vaccinated. Did you have any concern when this started happening? Any feelings towards it?

[1:12:33]

Carissa: So I mentioned earlier, my mom works in a hospital setting and I had some old co-workers in Arkansas whose family members were in and out of the hospital. And I saw different things saying that the hospitals were filling up and my mom was like, people were saying, oh, I'm waiting hours for a hospital bed. And so that did worry me. I was like okay, this one seems more real. And I'm not saying the last one wasn't.

[1:12:59] It was the area I was in, it didn't hit as hard and so I didn't see that the first time. Like people saw that, people saw their hospitals full. I hadn't and so I think to see that kind of, it was like, okay wait a second, like this little stressful, I was a little worried we were gonna run out of toilet paper again. That's kind of my stress because that and Germ-X, like we use Germ-X often anyways and so finding Germ-X was a nightmare.

[1:13:27] And so it was more of that like, are we gonna go into a shortage on things again? Are we gonna stress again? But I'm still in just the mindset that Chase and I are strong enough. Like, our bodies will recover. I do worry for my mom, because she does have underlying issues and I do worry that if she gets it, it's gonna be detrimental. She's been exposed a couple times and it infuriated me that she was even put in those positions by other people.

[1:14:00] Anytime I have ever felt sick or Chase feels sick, we don't go near them because we we're not going to be the reason they get sick. So that was kind of like – I guess seeing it kind of made me a little bit more worried but not any more than I was the last one.

Amanda: And then that's kind of when masks began to be mandated again August 3. And so did that change anything in the office?

[1:14:33]

Carissa: Just everybody had to wear the mask again. That was it.

Amanda: It seems like from my own perceptions and what I've been listening to when I've been doing these interviews is that kind of after this summer 2021 people – you know, even though there was the rise people tended to not be as worried since I think more people are vaccinated. There's just, you know, I think some people have been more relaxed. Is that something that you notice is that there is less fear with the rise of Delta?

[1:15:01]

Carissa: Yeah, I think it's just people are kind of like this is the new normal and people are just kind of tired of panicking. And then I mean, the ones that are vaccinated, they do feel a lot more comfortable. And that's great. If the vaccine gives them that peace of mind, then absolutely get it.

Amanda: And then on August 23rd is when the FDA announced its full approval for Pfizer's vaccine, which they named Comirnaty.

[1:15:31] And, you know, for a lot of people, that was kind of like a sigh of relief. Did that change anything for you guys?

Carissa: No, it didn't. We still have the same mindset on it. I mean, yeah, no, it didn't.

Amanda: And is that something that, you know, you feel comfortable discussing a bit more about kind of what your feelings are on the vaccine?

[1:15:59]

Carissa: So I don't even get the flu vaccine. I don't. I've gotten it a couple times because it's been required for my job. And I worked at a child development center where if they were going to get it, they had everything under the sun at some point. Kids are little germ plates, they have everything. So I got it there, but I don't normally get the flu vaccine. It's just not something I get.

[1:16:28] I mean, I'm immunized, my mom got all my vaccines growing up. But at the same time, isn't the chickenpox vaccine a thing? My mom gave me chickenpox. She made me hug my best friend when she had the chickenpox, because she knew I needed to get it. I needed to get it when I was young and get it over with. So I don't know if that's just kind of how I was raised. It's still fairly early. And I know people have their different opinions on it, that they've been working on it for years.

[1:16:57] And I just fear that they don't know the long-term effects of it. And so that worries me. You know, you see all the time the commercials on the TV, if you took this medication, like you're due for compensation. And so it just makes me wonder if we're not going to see that in a couple of years, because we don't know. It's still so new. And it was developed so fast. It scares me. And some people just don't like to be told like, hey, you have to get it. And I get that, too. That's not my reasoning. But I get that.

[1:17:25] Mine is just, I fear what the long-term effects are.

Amanda: And that leads us exactly into the next part, which is that in late August is when Illinois started mandating vaccines for those in high-risk settings. So that included health care workers and teachers. And I think we kind of discussed earlier your thoughts on that, but it didn't really become real until August 26.

[1:17:54] And, you know, they had the option at that point that you could get tested weekly. Do you think that that is something that the states have the right to do?

Carissa: I don't. I feel you can get it with the vaccine or without the vaccine. Either way you're going to get it. It prevents you from getting as worse symptoms, but it does not prevent you from spreading it. And so my issue with that is we have medical freedom. We shouldn't be told that we have to get a vaccine. And so that, I don't think it is right.

[1:18:25]

Amanda: Do you think that allowing you to get – not you specifically, but allowing an individual to get tested weekly as opposed to getting the vaccine, does that seem to be a fair compromise? Or do you think that's still an infringement?

Carissa: I still think that's definitely stepping over that line. However, I am willing to do that over forcing them, somebody to get that vaccine. My mother is in a situation right now where she is medically exempt. She's been told by two doctors she's medically exempt, but her employer won't accept it.

[1:18:55] So my mom's options are to get a vaccine that could potentially harm her or keep her job. Or lose her job, I guess. And so that infuriates me. I think that's ridiculous. And I know they recently just put a freeze on Biden's mandate, but because Pritzker still has his mandate, it doesn't matter. And so that infuriates me. I do not think they have the right to do it.

Amanda: Have they taken away the option, then, to get tested weekly for individuals?

Carissa: My mom's facility never offered it.

[1:19:25] It was you get it by this date or you're gone.

Amanda: I can imagine that'd be very difficult for her.

Carissa: Now, like Chase with school, Chase could test weekly. And so that is nice. He is able to test weekly. He doesn't have to test now due to having COVID at some point, but he will eventually have to start testing again.

Amanda: And what I was going to ask again is that in September, that's when President Biden came out with mandating the vaccine or weekly testing for companies with more than 100 workers.

[1:19:55] And, you know, I was going to ask your opinion, but it's similar.

Carissa: Yeah, I mean, I definitely don't think it's right. If my company tells me I have to test weekly, that's fine. I'll test weekly. I mean, false positives are a thing. False negatives are a thing. We personally had a false negative. Thankfully, we still quarantined and stayed home anyways, because Chase did not feel good. But he had a false negative. So they're both. The test is not 100% accurate, and that's fine. Nothing in life is. So if my company ever comes

down and says, we have to all test weekly, but I don't think we should force somebody to get a mandate or the vaccine.

[1:20:30]

Amanda: What do you think would be the best solution to mitigating the effects of the pandemic?

Carissa: I don't even know that I have the answer for that. I honestly don't. Personally, I feel like it is a little political. I have had a doctor say that.

[1:20:54] There are people who think that. There are people who don't think that, and that is fine. But what we're doing isn't working. If it is still actually ramping up like it is, it's not working. But I don't know. And people will say, well, if everybody would get the vaccine. But if you can still get it with the vaccine, I'm not sure what the answer to that is.

Amanda: Do you see the pandemic becoming more endemic, which is, you know, becoming like the flu, something that occurs every year and becomes more normal?

[1:21:24]

Carissa: Yes, yeah, at least for a couple years. It'll be the normal.

Amanda: And I think I heard a segment somewhere that was talking about flu, cold, and COVID season.

Carissa: Mm-hmm, yep. Yeah, I feel like it will be.

Amanda: And it was in September that you and your husband actually contracted COVID yourselves?

[1:21:49]

Carissa: Yes, so it would have been August 26th. Chase was feeling sick at work and he went and got a test and it came back negative. He had a sore throat, he just had a headache, like just felt miserable. It was negative, so we went back to work because we have to pay the bills. And so we went back to work. Friday he woke up and he's like, Carissa, I feel miserable. I'm staying home. And I said, you know what? I'm going to go out and stay home too, just in case it is something.

[1:22:20]

I was like, maybe you have strep or something. So Friday I stayed home. I kind of worked a little bit from home, but I just didn't do much. And then Saturday he just was miserable, bless his heart. He had every symptom in the book. Sunday he woke up and just had the worst dry cough. Like he was

just, gasping. And I was like, get in the car, we're going to urgent care. So I called them, he sat in the car for an hour waiting for his appointment.

[1:22:48] We went in and the lady tested him and the doctor comes in head to toe in PPE gear and we're like, I looked at him, he looked at me, we just kind of were like, uh-oh. And he goes, well, bad news, you're positive my friend. We knew it because the nurse only had a mask and gloves on, he came in, goggles, like the whole like suit and so we're like, okay, yeah, like we knew it from the moment we saw him. And he gave Chase an inhaler and pretty much said like, get a pulse ox, keep track of your oxygen.

[1:23:20] If it goes below 90, go to the ER. Other than that, just quarantine. He's like, do you guys have people here who can go get you things? And we're like, yeah, like our neighbors, we have a couple friends that can go, like Chase's mom offered to drive two hours just to drop supplies off on her front porch and leave. When he got sick, on that Friday, Saturday, I did a grocery pickup because I knew if we had it, it was going to be rough.

[1:23:47] And so I just did a grocery pickup so that way I wasn't in contact with anybody. I could get what I needed. And then Sunday we went after the thing, we went to the drive-thru to get his medicine and a pulse ox and a couple other things because they just were able to get it from the store for us. And then Monday, he's miserable at this point. Monday we were laying on the couch and I looked up at him and he goes, oh no. My face was just so red and so rosy and I was like, I don't feel good.

[1:24:15] And he's like you don't look good. And I had a fever And so I just did a virtual visit. His doctor told me just assume you have it go ahead and quarantine Your quarantine starts the day your symptoms start. He's like you're quarantined now. He's like your 10 days don't start till your symptoms start. He's like you're not symptomatic, it's 10 days after your last exposure to him. And I wasn't gonna make him quarantine in a room because he was miserable and I felt so bad.

[1:24:41] Like his head hurt so bad, he couldn't eat, didn't want to eat. I had to force him to eat. And so once I got it, like that morning I knew it was coming, so I cleaned the house real quick got everything ready like made us a good breakfast like this probably the last time we're gonna eat. And that afternoon is when I was real sick. And so my quarantine started that day. And then I did a virtual visit with my doctor. She's like you don't even have to go get tested, you have it. Your husband's positive. You have all the symptoms, you have it. You're home for 10 days.

[1:25:12] And so we just camped out in the basement because it was cold in the basement and we both had really high fever so the basement was like the

only spot we could stay. It was too hot up here for us and so we were just like camped out in the basement for two weeks. We slept down there on the couch. It was rough. And he had the headache. I didn't get the headache. I was nauseous, he wasn't nauseous. My chest hurts, I could only lay on my stomach because it took the pressure off my lungs.

[1:25:44] So I slept on my stomach. It was kind of like I don't move or I'm going to throw up kind of situation. And he had to get up and do schoolwork, so he had homework that he had to still do. Really, like, towards the end of his quarantine, he got up and started moving around and trying to get his homework done. He ended up taking a day extra because the night before his quarantine ended, he spiked a fever, and he was to be fever free for 24 hours.

[1:26:12] So he took an extra day, and I ended up taking an extra day because I couldn't walk up the stairs without, like, gasping for breath. And I was like, I'm not going to be able to go to work. So I took an extra day, and then I went that Friday, and somebody had concerns about me being there, so they sent me home for another day off. I thankfully got COVID pay, so that was kind of a blessing, knowing that I could be home sick for two weeks and I was still getting paid. So, but yeah, it was a long two weeks.

Amanda: Were you able to get an inhaler or anything like that?

[1:26:43]

Carissa: I didn't. My doctor didn't prescribe me anything. I wish she would have. Chase didn't really use his inhaler, so I used it. And I checked my pulse ox often. Like, we carried around the inhaler, the pulse ox, and the thermometer. Like, that went everywhere with us. If it was in the bedroom, downstairs, wherever we were. But yeah, it was—I just used his, and it helped tremendously because I couldn't breathe. It was rough.

[1:27:11]

Amanda: That seems like the scariest part is the not being able to breathe.

Carissa: Yes, and I checked my pulse ox one time, and I was actually on the phone with my mom, and like, I just instant tears. It was at 85. My mom was like, go to the ER right now. And I was like, I checked it again, and it was back in the 90s. So I was like, it was just a bad read. It's OK. But it was scary. It was. I knew we were going to be OK. So I mean, I guess it wasn't like scary in that sense. But it was just, it was scary, like, not being, like, just being that sick.

[1:27:40] Chase compared it to a really bad cold. I compared mine to just a bad flu. Because I had the nausea and all that and he didn't. He had more like the

head cold symptoms. He had a really bad headache and I thankfully did not get that.

Amanda: That seems to be another hallmark of people's experience is that everyone experiences COVID so differently.

Carissa: He lost his smell and his taste. I lost my smell for a week and I didn't know I lost it until I went to put some Vicks on my chest.

[1:28:09] And I was like, wait a second, I can't smell this. So I knew I lost my smell. I only lost it for a week. He lost his for a couple weeks. And his smell's completely back. And so is his taste. But every once in a while, he gets a metallic-y smell. And then that's a metallic-y taste. So that's still just driving him insane. But we did the orange trick. I don't know if you've seen that. It was floating around the internet, where you burn the orange, and then you mash it up with brown sugar and eat it. He did that, and it worked. The only thing he could taste during the entire time was Popeye's chicken.

[1:28:38] The only thing that didn't make me nauseous was Chick-fil-A fries. So we did a lot of Door Dash. A lot of Door Dash because none of us, neither of us felt well enough to stand up and cook anything. So when I did my grocery pickup, I did a lot of Lunchables, easier things that we can just grab and eat. Chicken noodle soup. I ate an entire box of saltine crackers because that's all I could eat for a while. But yeah, Chick-fil-A french fries was the one thing that didn't make me nauseous.

[1:29:08] I couldn't do the sauce or the sandwich or anything, but I could do the fries. Other fries tasted like dirt. And so it was always Chick-fil-A fries and he could only taste Popeye's chicken.

Amanda: And it stinks that you couldn't order from one place. You have to do two.

Carissa: You have to do two, yeah. And they charge you two. Like two, I guess, delivery fees each. We would do one one night and then one the other night. We did a lot of DoorDash.

[1:29:38]

Amanda: And I've also heard people talk about after being healed for a while, then experiencing where they get overwhelming smells of like feces and just really gross smells.

Carissa: So thankfully not that. When I was in the fifth grade I had nasal surgery. They had to go in and like thin the lining of my nose and there was like a very just distinct smell after that surgery and I kept smelling that when I had COVID.

[1:30:07] And so I was like that just made me 10 times more nauseous. Chase just couldn't smell anything. And now like it took about a month I would say for my chest to really stop hurting and to be able to breathe. I couldn't have had this conversation with you right after because it was like I was gasping. Same thing for Chase. It took him a while just to finally feel ourselves. I will say though and I don't know how true this is.

[1:30:35] I just recently had someone on Facebook ask like who's had COVID within the last 90 days? Like when did you get your smells back? And somebody was like my hair has been falling out. She's like and I didn't think anything of it up until I was on like a COVID page and a lot of people are saying a couple months after they got COVID their hair has been falling out. I've been losing hair like crazy the past couple like the past month or so. And I got I got my hair done so I was like oh my gosh like did the dye like mess my hair up? Like did something happen? I've never had to clean out the drain.

[1:31:03] And my hair is falling out like crazy. I have a lot of hair so it's fine for now but my hair is falling out like crazy. And so I don't know if that is true if it is because of COVID or what but just to see somebody else say like oh I'm losing hair I'm like oh my gosh, so am I. Like, it is falling out like crazy.

Amanda: That's another aspect I've heard about is that there's so many different aspects of people you know feeling the symptoms after a while but it's still so new that these symptoms are really documented.

[1:31:35]

Carissa: Yeah and so if it is true then it makes sense when my hair is falling out and I hope it stops soon because I only have so much. But yeah it's like little strands everywhere. And so like thankfully it's not chunks but it's like strand after strand after strand. And yeah it's rough.

Amanda: But do you feel for the most part back to normal now?

Carissa: Yeah.

[1:32:00] I really don't think I have any other symptoms. I feel better. It took a couple weeks for my chest to – like I would be walking to the printer and I'm trying to breathe. And not long after I got back I fell again and hurt my ankle and then the elevators at work went down. I live and work on the third floor so I had to walk three flights of steps. Yeah it went down the day after I fell and sprained my ankle again.

[1:32:28] And so the stairs were rough, and so walking hurt my like chest and stuff. But yeah, I would say Chase and I are both pretty back to normal aside from his random smells. It just makes him so mad because he'll be eating

something he really likes and he's like, can't eat it now, it's metallic-y. And so he stops eating it. Yeah.

Amanda: That would be very frustrating.

Carissa: Yeah it's randomly too. It doesn't happen every time, it's just random.

[1:32:59]

Amanda: And we met for our pre-interview at the end of October. Has much changed for you since then?

Carissa: No, not really at all. Work is the same and yeah no, not really.

Amanda: So you've been in this house for a year now?

Carissa: Yes.

Amanda: That's been going well it sounds like.

Carissa: Yeah, I mean, our last house was practically brand new. It was only three years old.

[1:33:27] So we're learning what it's like to live in an older home. So there's a lot of adjustments there. I mean, everything at our old house was still under warranty and things like that. And so we're learning. Chase is really becoming the handyman. He's learned to put new lights in our hallway. He put a new light and fan in the bathroom. Like he's really learning to become quite the handyman here. But yeah, it's going well. Nothing's really changed in the last couple of months. Trying to think. School is all online.

[1:33:58] He actually got COVID from school. So that was kind of interesting to us because we had traveled to Florida and nobody in Florida wore masks. We've traveled to Arkansas twice. We've gone back and forth to our parents multiple times. We went to Chicago right before the mask mandate happened again. And nothing. He got it from school. And he actually did just get quarantined a week or two ago, but he didn't have to quarantine because it was still within our 90 days of having COVID.

[1:34:27] Our 90 days ends at the end of this month, so he didn't have to quarantine because he's not even able to get the vaccine yet. And so we're still technically immune. And so that's been kind of interesting to see how that has changed because I know like now if you're vaccinated, if you're exposed, you don't have to quarantine. And so that's how my mom was exposed. She worked with a lady whose husband was positive and that lady came right back to work because she wasn't experiencing symptoms. But then she was positive.

[1:34:55] And so that's what's concerning to me is that we're not requiring quarantine for vaccinated people unless they're showing symptoms. And so my mom was exposed twice because of it. And so that was concerning to me. But it's just interesting to see how things are changing with the quarantine and all of that.

Amanda: And so are there things that you've started doing differently because of COVID or the pandemic that you think you'll continue to do after it's, quote unquote, normal?

[1:35:30]

Carissa: I use a lot more Germ-X. I mean, we've always used a lot, but I definitely think I use a lot more now. I don't grocery shop anymore. I only do the online pickup. That was the best thing that ever kind of happened. Like I never did it until COVID happened. And my best friend was like, you have to try it. But I remember when COVID first hit, you had to book your groceries out a week in advance. Like everything was booked up and now you can do it for the next day. But yeah, it saves me so much time to not go into the grocery store.

[1:35:59] And it saves me a lot of money too. Cause I touch everything. So that's probably better than if not in the grocery store, but yeah, it saves me a lot of money and time. So that's definitely one. Other than that, we really haven't changed our lifestyle much. We really haven't. And I think that's, you know, mentally, I think that's why we've stayed pretty on the upside of it, because I don't think we could have survived staying in a house for this long.

Amanda: And I was going to ask if anyone you know has gotten COVID.

[1:36:32] But you guys have gotten COVID. Anyone close to you?

Carissa: I don't think so. None of our siblings have. His brother recently was just exposed. He took three tests and they were all negative, so he was good. I can't think of anybody.

Amanda: That's a good sign.

Carissa: Yeah, and that's why I'm saying it hasn't affected us. I mean, I see people from my hometown.

[1:37:04] We had a girl from our hometown pass from COVID. Well, not from COVID, but from the pneumonia that it caused later on. And so I see it happening. And I know people that I went to school with that I've gotten it. But in our family and our friend group, the only other person I would know is my high school best friend. She tested positive while she was giving birth. She had no symptoms. And then her husband just recently had it. So she kind of

quarantined from him. A couple, they quarantined and he was fine. He had a cold like symptoms.

[1:37:34] The only reason why he got tested was because his work made him. I really think that's it. It's kind of scary how it happens because I actually had plans with her the next day. Chase got sick Thursday and we were supposed to go to Champaign on Saturday for my sister-in-law's birthday. We were going to meet my best friend with her kid and her fiancé for lunch. And I was just like, I'm really sorry guys, we're not feeling good, I don't want to risk it.

[1:38:05] And then sure enough, the next day we found out it was COVID. I was like, I'm so glad I didn't risk it because her son's not even a year old yet. And so I wouldn't have been able to forgive myself had we gotten him sick. But yeah, I think they're the only two that I can think of that have had it.

Amanda: It's good to hear that you're getting healthy.

Carissa: Yeah, and I mean that's why I think it's kind of, it's not impacted us a lot. We haven't seen it much. I mean, we were the only ones and even then our family was just kind of like, eh, you'll be okay.

[1:38:35] Like, let us know if you need anything. They checked on us frequently, but it wasn't... One time, Chase and I did sleep in pretty long and his mom texted both of us and was like, you respond within the next 15 minutes or I'm calling 911. She was very concerned, but we woke up. Like, we were like, we're sorry. We were just sleeping. Like, we slept a lot. Sleep was wonderful.

Amanda: A very good healing remedy.

Carissa: Yeah.

Amanda: And, you know, what would you say was the most difficult experience for you during 2020?

[1:39:06] Kind of changing the tone a little bit, but...

Carissa: I mean, I would say the most difficult experiences for us were difficult with COVID or without. I mean, selling a house, starting a new life. We moved to a completely unfamiliar area. I've been to Peoria three times in my entire life. And we chose to live here. We're two hours from everybody. So, I mean, those are going to be difficult with or without COVID. Starting new jobs. I definitely think COVID didn't help starting my job.

[1:39:36] Chase was in person, it didn't affect his, but I mean, learning a new job as soon as mine over Zoom and like being from home, like there was a lot of phone calls. Like I called my supervisor probably 10 times a day, if not more, asking questions. So, I mean, that would really be the only thing I think

COVID affected was just starting a new job and not being able to be in the office. Other than that, everything else we had was going to be challenging with or without COVID.

Amanda: Definitely, especially moving and selling a house, all of those experiences.

[1:40:08]

Carissa: I mean, we sold our house within 28 days. So, I mean, it didn't slow the process down. We actually expected it to be a lot longer. We listed it in March and we had an offer within 28 days. And so, she actually wanted to move in in two weeks. And we were like, we can give you a month. So, we had to live with a friend. So it didn't slow the process down. We listed it on a Tuesday and we had an offer that Friday. It wasn't a good offer, but it shows that it didn't slow that down. And so I mean, the lady that bought her house, she turned around – she bought it in May, and she sold it in November.

[1:40:40] So I mean, it didn't slow that process down by any means. If anything, COVID has for some odd reason created a crazy market for housing.

Amanda: Well, it makes sense. People spend more time in their homes than they ever had.

Carissa: I will say the most challenging part about COVID for us was everything was gone in the stores. Like, there was no workout equipment. We couldn't go to our gyms. So we're like, okay, we're going to create a home workout gym. Good luck finding a dumbbell at least.

[1:41:08] Like anything. There was nothing. The bike shops. Like, you saw Walmart was gone. Even the big major bike shops where the bikes are \$500, \$600, they were gone. When I went to buy my bike, because I had a just a smaller bike, nothing special, and I wanted to get a better mountain bike, they had two or three in my size and that was it. Everything. My neighbor was like, we went to the store to buy board games for family game night and there was nothing.

[1:41:36] And so that was a challenge for us, but it was beautiful to see because families are spending time together. We're spending time outside. We're spending time together and that was wonderful. Chase's brothers, it was April and May, they came and spent three weeks with us. They've never been able to do that but because of COVID they were home, they were off school, so they spent three weeks. We did family walks every night. We rode our bikes, we walked our dogs. Like we were just able to spend that quality time with his brothers that we haven't got.

[1:42:04] And he's been away from his brothers by that point for almost five years. And so it was nice just to have three weeks with them. So that was nice. And so, I mean, I guess if anything, COVID was kind of a blessing for us. We were able to spend time with people that we only get to see twice a year now. We were able to spend more time together. Chase and I really, really grew as a couple over that time. And so it was good for us.

[1:42:33] And I hate to say that because it's a scary thing. It's a real thing, but it was. It didn't affect us much. And so we're blessed when it comes to that.

Amanda: I feel like maybe you had some hesitation saying that, but that's good to hear.

Carissa: And I do, because I feel so guilty because there are people who it has affected in a very serious way. I'm just blessed that it hasn't affected us in that way and it has had some positives for us.

[1:43:03]

Amanda: Did your views on the pandemic change over time?

Carissa: No, it hasn't and at some point it might. I'm kind of the point where it's just like I don't want to hear about it anymore. Like I'm to that point where I'm just like I don't want to hear the word COVID. I don't want to see another face mask. I'm just over it. I think everybody is at that point. But that's really it. I just think I'm kind of over it and it's still a real thing and so I can be over it all I want.

[1:43:33] It's not going anywhere, but I can just be over it and hate it and be sick and tired of it.

Amanda: And in a similar vein, has your view on the foster care system changed over your time there?

Carissa: Absolutely. Yeah, I mean it's definitely – I've learned more, my knowledge has grown and there is a serious need for foster parents so I would encourage absolutely everybody to become foster parents.

[1:44:03] It's made me want to become a foster parent and I've talked to Chase about it and that's not something that I think we're capable of doing right now. But at some point it would be nice to maybe even just do respite where we take a child for the weekend or in emergency situations they stay with us for a couple days until they find a permanent placement. And so yeah, no it definitely has. I've realized how much need there is for growth and help in that department, like in that field. We need help from foster parents, we need help from communities, we need help from everybody.

[1:44:30] It's not just a one agency does it all. You have to have help from everybody.

Amanda: Has it given new meaning to the phrase it takes a village?

Carissa: Absolutely. Like we try to do things for our foster parents and things but being a nonprofit we have to have those donations and things like that. So it's wonderful to see the community that does help the agencies.

[1:45:00]

Amanda: And is a long-term goal of yours to eventually work for CASA or are you happy where you're at?

Carissa: I'm happy where I'm at. I told Chase I could see myself doing licensing forever. I mean if I go back to school it probably won't be for social work and that's just because my dream obviously is something else. But if I don't, which watching him in school I don't think I ever want to go back, I think I could. I could see myself doing licensing forever. It's a stressful job but it's rewarding and I don't think we'll be in the Peoria area forever but this is a job that goes wherever.

[1:45:36] So when Chase graduates and he finds where he wants to settle down, this job can go everywhere. Every single county has this job.

Amanda: That helps with flexibility.

Carissa: It does. It makes it a lot easier knowing that we're not here forever.

Amanda: And after a year and a half of experiencing new normals, what would be your vision for normalcy?

[1:46:02]

Carissa: I mean, this kind of goes back to, my normal didn't change. Like yeah, we wear a mask now and use a lot more Germ-X and try to keep our distance, but that kind of is nice because I don't love when people are right on top of me at a grocery store or like I don't love big crowds necessarily. So I mean I'm not a hugger, so it's wonderful because nobody wants to hug anymore. I have like three people and that's it and nobody wants to hug you anymore. Nobody wants to shake your hand and that's perfect for me.

[1:46:31] So that is the perfect new normal. We don't touch each other. But other than that, it really hasn't. As long as everything is open and we can still go bowl, we can still go mountain bike, we can still go to football games and concerts and things like that, then that's my normal. And it really hasn't changed because I mean we've done pretty much all of that. For a while we couldn't go to a restaurant, that's fine, we parked in the parking lot and sat in the

back of the truck and ate. We did a lot of campouts and things like that in restaurant parking lots.

[1:47:01] And I mean, it was amazing with our friends. We would just sit around and circle on the ground in a parking lot and eat a dinner. And so, I mean, my normal is what I'm – it was before the COVID and hopefully that stays.

Amanda: It sounds like you definitely have a focus for family and for friends. And that hasn't changed.

Carissa: Nope. And we've been blessed to find some good friends here and we're still working to find our normal.

[1:47:29] It took us a couple years in Arkansas to find our happy, like find our normal and find what our life needed to be and kind of get into a groove. And we're a year and a half in here in Illinois again and we're trying to get back there.

Amanda: Is there anything that you wish you had known at the start of the pandemic that you know now? And you know given kind of the way our conversation has gone that doesn't necessarily I guess mean the pandemic with COVID but also just the past year and a half.

[1:47:58]

Carissa: So not necessarily something I wish I would have known. Something I wish I would have focused on was just roll with the punches. Go with it, you can't change it. And I definitely wish I would have known that there was a hole in the ground and I would have avoided that the first time. But other than that, no, I mean, life's all about learning experiences and everything that we went through was for a reason. But I definitely wish I would have told myself, just relax. It's going to be okay.

[1:48:28] I was very stressed when it first happened. I was laid off because I was like, oh my gosh, that's a huge pay cut that I am now going to have to survive on. And so we were trying to come up with – Chase and I were sitting down, like, okay, what can we cut? Where can we, how can we make this work? And then it was like right after that, they announced the extra 600 and it was like, okay, we're going to be just fine. I was saving money because I wasn't driving 45 minutes to work every day. Gas prices were already low, so that was wonderful.

[1:48:57] But, no, there's not really anything I wish I would have known. I just wish I would have rolled with the punches a little bit better and just not stressed about other things and just kind of like him not being able to come home with me when I wanted him to. That was tough, but it's unfortunately the life

when you have the military involved. There's no certainty. And it worked out, and I was very thankful I had family to help me. That's really it.

[1:49:24]

Amanda: And then my final question that I've been asking for everybody, and you know, with you, we can also make it include not just pre-pandemic, but you know, pre-move. You know, if you could say anything to yourself before the pandemic started, before you moved to Illinois, what would it be?

Carissa: I guess I go straight back. Just go with it. Everything's going to work out. My dad used to always say, like, don't sweat the small stuff and the big stuff will fall in place.

[1:49:55] And I kind of lost sight of that during that move. And I think that's something that I should have, like, focused on more. And I mean, during the pandemic, like, my coworkers were very stressed. My coworker's daughter had really bad asthma. And I remember the stress and fear she had. Because she thought if her daughter got it, like, she would not survive. And so I remember that stress that she went through. And it was just like seeing that kind of panicked me and I just think telling myself everything's gonna be okay everything will work out.

[1:50:27] And I'd known that life would have been better. But we have to go through those phases in life and go through those experiences to become stronger. But yeah just definitely just go with it. It's gonna work out one way or another. It may not be what we want but something's gonna work out.

Amanda: And those conclude my questions. Do you have anything that you would like to add?

Carissa: I don't think I do. I think I've talked a lot about this last year and it's just made me very grateful for the turnout of it.

Amanda: Well, thank you so much, Carissa, for being willing to talk about all of these different events of your life. We really, really appreciate it.

Carissa: No problem. Thanks for having me, though.