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**Wisconsinites share how they are coping and adapting one year into the COVID-19 pandemic**

*By Bridgit Bowden, Coburn Dukehart and Bram Sable-Smith, WPR / Wisconsin Watch*

More than one year ago, Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers directed the state Department of Health Services to order the [temporary closure of  K-12 schools across the state](https://www.wpr.org/gov-tony-evers-mandates-closure-all-k-12-schools). It was the first sign of the social upheaval to come: business closures, virtual schooling, massive unemployment and more than 6,500 state residents dead from the novel coronavirus.

Although Wisconsin[first detected](https://www.wpr.org/wisconsin-resident-who-traveled-china-states-first-confirmed-coronavirus-case) COVID-19, the disease caused by the virus, in February 2020, mid-March marked the pandemic’s beginning for most Wisconsinites. WPR and Wisconsin Watch have followed a group of Wisconsinites through this life-changing time.

One year in, they reflected on how the pandemic has reshaped their lives, and how they envision the future.

**‘Oh shit. It’s here.’**

[Mariah Clark](https://wisconsinwatch.org/tag/mariah-clark/) spent the year on the front lines of the pandemic as an emergency department nurse at UW Health in Madison.

She spent the earliest days of 2020 reading about the virus in news reports and journal articles. But the pandemic became real in February when her hospital treated Wisconsin’s [first](https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/news/releases/020520.htm) patient infected with COVID-19.

“I’ll never forget that first COVID patient,” Clark said. “When that first case rolled into the department, I remember having that sensation of, ‘Oh shit. It’s here.’ And wondering how it was going to change everything.”

Clark’s ensuing year offered “strange dualities.” The [slow days](https://wisconsinwatch.org/2020/05/er-nurse-reflects-on-coronavirus-wisconsin-prepares-to-open/) waiting for the storm gave way to the trauma of watching [friends](https://wisconsinwatch.org/2020/04/outbreak-wisconsin-mariah-clark-coronavirus-nurse/) and [patients](https://wisconsinwatch.org/2020/07/er-nurse-death-mourning-rites-of-passage-coronavirus/) succumb to the deadly virus. She watched helplessly as the pandemic [spiraled out of control](https://wisconsinwatch.org/2020/10/er-nurse-reflects-on-the-relentless-pandemic/) in Wisconsin and [state politics](https://wisconsinwatch.org/2020/10/politics-paralyzed-wisconsin-pandemic-response-families-grieving/) stymied attempts at a coherent response.

In that tragedy, Clark also found hope.

“There were aspects of COVID that let us really connect back to the fact that we as nurses are there to care for whole people — and not just assemblages of parts that aren’t working right at the time,” Clark said.

“We had seen friends or family or co-workers who had gotten ill. We could picture ourselves there. And it felt — a lot of the time — a lot more human.”

**‘Most of us were just surviving’**

When [Jessica Barrera](https://wisconsinwatch.org/tag/jessica-barrera/) revisits her thoughts from the pandemic’s earliest days, she can’t help but recall her anxiety. How could she forget?

People stopped traveling when the coronavirus pandemic hit, costing the 41-year-old single mother her job at an airport shuttle service in Eau Claire. She [spent months waiting](https://wisconsinwatch.org/2020/06/wisconsin-blocks-pandemic-payments-for-federal-disability-aid-recipients/) for unemployment benefits while the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development denied the assistance to part-time workers like her who also receive federal disability aid.

“There was so much that was out of my control,” Barrera said. “It makes me feel tired, almost, to hear myself.”

She added: “A year ago, most of us were just surviving day-to-day: emotionally, mentally, physically, financially, just to get through to the next day.”

But things are looking up for Barrera. She’s found new, meaningful work helping adults with special needs find jobs. And her 11-year-old son Niko has returned to school in-person two days a week. That was after finishing the previous school year and [beginning](https://wisconsinwatch.org/2020/08/single-mom-talks-with-son-returning-to-school/) the [new one](https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/10/15/923716847/being-a-mom-is-tough-being-a-mom-in-a-pandemic-is-even-tougher) virtually. Barrera now wishes she could reassure her March 2020 self.

“I would let her know that you get used to wearing a mask — it’s not so weird after the first little while. And to just keep your faith that things will get better,” she said.

**‘I do feel a sense of sadness for the things that I’ve lost’**

[Amy Moreland](https://wisconsinwatch.org/tag/amy-moreland/) of Madison first lost her job as a bartender and events coordinator on March 17, 2020.

“It feels like a million years away, and it also feels just like yesterday,” she said.

Looking back, she said she never expected the pandemic to last so long. Moreland remained[unemployed for much of the past  year](https://www.wpr.org/outbreak-wisconsin-it-doesnt-look-theres-end-sight), and she [struggled for months to access jobless benefits](https://www.wpr.org/outbreak-wisconsin-day-54-and-finally-some-financial-relief).

Eventually, she [completely changed her life’s trajectory](https://wisconsinwatch.org/2021/02/after-pandemic-closes-bars-and-restaurants-amy-moreland-carves-a-new-path/) by returning to school. She’s pursuing a degree in social work at Madison College, aiming to eventually become an addiction counsellor.

“I’m really excited for the future, but I do feel a sense of sadness for the things that I’ve lost,” she said.

Moreland envisions looking back on the pandemic when she’s older, “telling our grandkids about the quarantine and all this, and it being something that we got through.”

“There is hope,” Moreland said, even after a hellish year.

“You can truly be excited about everything that’s coming and grieve the things that have passed.”

**‘This process really made me stronger’**

For [Adija Greer-Smith](https://wisconsinwatch.org/tag/adija-greer-smith/), owner of Confectionately Yours bakery in Milwaukee, 2020 wasn’t all doom and gloom.

Like many businesses, the bakery shuttered for several months in the spring and summer. But Greer-Smith saw huge success after [re-opening in July](https://www.wpr.org/outbreak-wisconsin-milwaukee-baker-adija-greer-smith-slowly-reopens-her-business). That included forging business deals with the Green Bay Packers and Milwaukee Bucks.

“It opened so many doors of opportunity,” Greer-Smith said, acknowledging that 2020 proved “catastrophic” in other ways. She rode an “emotional roller coaster,” with both of her kids learning virtually from home and her husband grappling with a COVID-19 diagnosis. (He is now recovered and vaccinated.)

Confectionately Yours sits in the [Sherman Phoenix](https://www.shermanphoenix.com/), a space for small business led by people of color. Fire damaged the building — previously a bank —  in 2016 as Milwaukee’s Sherman Park neighborhood [experienced civil unrest](https://milwaukeenns.org/2019/08/13/unrest-in-sherman-park-three-years-later-have-police-community-relations-improved/) following the fatal police shooting of Sylville Smith. The Phoenix rose from those ashes. Greer-Smith knew she would encounter obstacles while launching her business in 2018.

“Clearly, this was a part of that process,” she said. “This process really made me stronger.”

When the bakery first closed in the spring, Greer-Smith shifted her energy into baking cookies for health care workers. Her team ultimately donated more than 20,000 baked goods, she said.

Now, she encourages others to put their energy into helping people.

“My hope for just, people, is that this year would have taught us all to just love more and hate less, because life is so very precious,” she said.

**‘Content to be who I am and where I am in time’**

[Beverly Blietz](https://wisconsinwatch.org/tag/beverly-blietz/), an 86-year-old Door County resident, kept a busy social calendar before the pandemic, even driving for Uber in her spare time.

But [she found herself confined to her small apartment](https://www.wpr.org/outbreak-wisconsin-i-grieve-time-thats-being-wasted) when then the independent living facility in Sister Bay where she lived tightened restrictions last spring.

“I grieved that time was being snatched from me,” she said. “The loss of the old normal meant the loss of so much that was meaningful in my life.”

She grew increasingly depressed, [worrying that a summer of isolation would be her last on earth.](https://www.wpr.org/outbreak-wisconsin-what-if-be-my-last-summer-earth)

“The older I get, the faster the time passes,” she said.

That triggered her to move out of the facility, entering a condo where she grasped more control over her life.

Blietz said that the past pandemic year has shifted what she values.

“More than ever, the importance of my family and relationships have taken precedence over the more frenzied activity of a daily calendar,” she said.

“I am content to be who I am and where I am in time.”

*Beverly Blietz made a gift to the Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism in 2020 and is a member of the Watchdog Club.*