

My How, My Why, My Work: High Plains

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SPEAKERS

Sarah Fish, Whitney Pennington, Phillip Stokes, Lisa Lundy, Ricky Telg, Amanda Wickman

Ricky Telg 00:04

This is Science by the Slice, a podcast from the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Center for Public Issues Education. In this podcast, experts discuss the science of issues affecting our daily lives, reveal the motivations behind the decisions people make, and ultimately provide insight to solutions for our lives.

Phillip Stokes 00:31

Hello, I'm Phillip Stokes. Thanks for joining us in our series, The Essential Worker. This is a subset within that series titled, My How, My Why, My Work, including conversations with individuals working to make the agriculture, forestry, and fishing sector safer for all of those within it. Promoting health and safety in agriculture is a long term mission, and I believe you can find amazing stories and impacts from the people working toward this goal. All you have to do is ask.

Whitney Pennington 01:05

Yeah, so I'll actually take you like way back, not way back, but...

Sarah Fish 01:09

My story is really about how a visual artist became a science communicator.

Amanda Wickman 01:15

My roles changed a lot over the years, but I feel like I'm one of the products of the center.

P

Phillip Stokes 01:22

These conversations were led by Dr. Lisa Lundy, Agricultural Communication Professor at the University of Florida. And today's episode comes to you from the High Plains.

L

Lisa Lundy 01:36

Today's interview is with Whitney Pennington. Whitney is the Outreach Coordinator for the High Plains Intermountain Center for Agricultural Health and Safety located at Colorado State University. In her role, she promotes best practices for farm safety, particularly those identified through the center's research. Whitney enjoys the challenges of translating research findings into real world applications that help people stay safe at work and at home. Whitney earned her master's in public health from Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia.

L

Lisa Lundy 02:15

All right, so thank you for joining us today. As we get started, I was wondering if you could just tell me a little bit about your background and how you began working with the center?

W

Whitney Pennington 02:27

Yeah, so I'll actually take you like way back, not way back. But um, so when I was growing up, I wanted to be, my dad and stepmom are veterinarians and I wanted to be a veterinarian. As a little kid, that's all I wanted, followed my dad around at work, all of that stuff. Then as I sort of grew older, and towards high school, I had more of an interest in human medicine. And when I got to college, I was first exposed to the idea of One Health. And really the idea that where we live, where we play, where we work all influences our health, and that was really my first exposure to that idea, but it fit me really well. I was like, Oh, yes, this makes sense to what I've been sort of thinking about wanting to do or struggling with why, Well, medicine doesn't quite feel right. Veterinarian doesn't quite feel right. But public health feels really right. And at that time, I started working in a research lab, where we were studying West Nile virus and the circulation of West Nile virus in Atlanta. And we were catching birds, we were catching mosquitoes in the community, in people's backyards, in public parks. And so it was this really tangible experience of science communication, of I have to be able to explain what we're doing, why it looks like we're handling, why we're handling birds in a park to a homeless person, or to the person who works at the zoo, you know, and to be able to think through, How do I tell the story? How do I communicate the purpose, and what we're doing to all of these different types of audiences? And so that's really where I went from sort of public health in general to public health communication, risk communication, in particular. And so after I did an undergrad and graduate degree together in environmental health and did a dual degree and then moved to Seattle, where I eventually got a job in poison control. And from there, that was my first like, health education communications job, of like, your job is to help, yes, tell people about poison center and the free service that it provides, but also help educate people on how to have a safe home, how to use medicine safely. We did a lot of harm reduction with raves, the dance clubs scene kind of stuff, because that was a big issue at the time. So that I mean, all of that sort of really was like, Yes, this feels like home, helping people understand the risks about where they

live and work and play. And my spouse is in the academic sphere. So we moved around a few times and ended up in Colorado at Colorado State University. And it just so happened that the ag center had this opening for their outreach coordinator that was communicating about, you know, yes, it was occupational safety. But how do people stay safe? How do we communicate the science that we're doing? And it was just such a good fit. That's how I ended up at our center.

L Lisa Lundy 05:14

Okay, great. Thank you. It's always interesting to hear how people ended up doing what they're doing. So tell me a little bit about what your role is in the center now.

W Whitney Pennington 05:24

Yeah, so I'm our outreach coordinator, which means I am day to day communication and outreach. And thinking, helping all of our researchers think through, now that we sort of have these research outcomes with these evidence based findings. How do we actually share those with intermediaries, end users so that people are actually safe at work? So that looks like managing social media, that looks like going to events, meeting other sort of stakeholders, ag organizations, other faculty, extension, community health workers, (inaudible). All of those folks and helping pull them into a larger network that can help us disseminate ag safety best practices.

L Lisa Lundy 06:11

Okay. And so as you are doing all of these different things, what is the story that you tell about your center, what makes your center unique?

W Whitney Pennington 06:20

Well, one of the things that I think makes our center unique is actually the region, which is not directly what you asked, but it does shape who we are and what we do. And we're situated in the Intermountain Region, right, between this sort of the grains of the Midwest, and then the sort of coastal California Pacific Northwest. And so we literally do everything. And even the state of Colorado is a microcosm of that an agriculture. Every product you can imagine, with the exception of like cotton and Christmas trees, can come from Colorado. And that expands to the whole region. And so we really could have our foot in a little bit of everything. But we have to think broadly about what we do and and what different people are doing in our region and the different, many different stakeholders we serve. So then the other thing that I think makes our center unique is that our most current funding cycle, our last funding cycle, our four research projects all had principal investigators from four different universities. And so being intentional about where people are coming from and taking their expertise from different parts of the region. And that, in turn, helps us make sure we're listening better and serving better the whole region. Yes, we have an administrative base at Colorado State University. But collaboration outside of that is really important and is of value to us.

L Lisa Lundy 07:44

So as you try to pull all that together and communicate on behalf of all those different researchers and the center, when you come to work each day, what are, who are the key audiences that you have in your mind? And how do you hope to impact their lives?

W Whitney Pennington 08:01

We do a lot of our work, we focus on our intermediaries. So I work most commonly and want to reach, me personally, most commonly, Extension educators, community health workers, the communications and membership people at ag serving organizations, the industry groups, those kinds of things. Because we are, we're lean. Our ag centers don't have huge budgets, we don't have huge personnel and US in particular, we have a very large geographic region, it's something like a quarter of all US farmland is in our basin. And so I am never individually going to reach farmers, ranchers, farmworkers, loggers in our region, that's just a huge ask. And so I really focus on reaching those intermediaries, creating resources that they want to share within their networks or training materials that they can (inaudible) when they go out and they're on farms. Extension agents have the resources that they need when they meet someone who has, you know, ATV safety is a great example of working with Extension agents, that they have the build trainings that they need that they can use in their communities.

L Lisa Lundy 09:18

Okay.

W Whitney Pennington 09:19

So I mean, we do want to get to end users and I do go to some farm shows, I do do social media that is aimed at reaching individual farmers, people who are out in the field, but we have to balance the two to be efficient with our resources.

L Lisa Lundy 09:34

Yeah, that's very similar to our experiences, really focusing on those intermediary audiences. So in your experience in your region, what have you found to be some of the most effective ways to reach those audiences?

W Whitney Pennington 09:48

One of the things that actually, well, a couple of things. One of them that I think we do well, we actually have a mini grant program within our outreach core. That's four organizations to create new programming or augment their existing programming, which really just sort of gives them the resources directly. And we can co create that with them and provide expertise that they need if there's a specific topic that they need help on. But what that does is it enables more

sustainable creation of messages and products. Those folks know their community better than we do at the university. Again, thinking about how are we sort of focusing in on the many different regional needs. And so that that project, excuse me, that grant program has created training programs that extension folks can use. ATV safety is a big one, some dairy safety in South Dakota has been done that way. We're working on ergonomics stuff right now with some folks in Montana. So that's really enabled us to get to new places to create resources that we maybe don't even know about.

L Lisa Lundy 11:00

Have there been any that have been surprising for you? I know, when we first started talking to our key stakeholders, we were just reminded how much people rely on email even though that seems so basic that people really wanted to get emails. So have there been any that have been surprising for you in terms of, Wow, that's a really effective way to reach my audiences.

W Whitney Pennington 11:24

I think, I mean, I'm not surprised, per se, but one of the one, it's the suite of digital things that we do, among social media, is YouTube, and our YouTube videos have been really successful. We have one on chainsaw safety that's like meant for individual landowners who want to help clear their own land of, How do I safely fell a tree? How do I do my safety inspection? That video, I mean, it has astronomical number of views in the last five years, like 28,000 hours.

L Lisa Lundy 11:56

Wow.

W Whitney Pennington 11:57

Which we as staff could never recreate that time and put in that time to reach people to that extent. And so that is a tool that just is so efficient. And we're still trying to dig through, like, How is it exactly that that video got to be so popular on YouTube? But we are benefiting from that sort of positive feedback of people are watching it. So it's, you know, moving up in rankings, but it's a very well done video. So that is one that has definitely served us very well. And I think of the digital sort of tools of social media, email newsletters, that the videos have done the best.

L Lisa Lundy 12:36

That makes sense. As you work with your PIs and researchers in the center, how do you help create this appreciation for science communication and for sharing about the research? I know, we do a lot of outreach in terms of actual safety campaigns, but as far as outreach about the research that's happening, how do you help support researchers in that?

W

Whitney Pennington 13:02

I feel really grateful that among our team, the outreach core and myself are respected for our communications experience. And so we have this sort of mode of operation where a lot of the communication that we do, people do look to me and asked me for my opinion, and say, Okay, well, we, I need to do, you know, we need to create this report, or we're going to do this sort of promotion, you know, let's make sure Whitney is involved, because we need to be thinking about, you know, the communication aspect of it, and how we're using plain language or getting to things that will resonate with all of our audiences. So I'm not really sure how we fostered that.

L

Lisa Lundy 13:50

Do you approach it more one on one with researchers? Or have you done any center wide like media relations training? Or is it more kind of a case by case basis?

W

Whitney Pennington 13:59

We have not done any center wide training. We have talked about it, and it was something that was sort of discussed when I first came to the center about four years ago, but I think what we've discovered, and this is true of our center as well as sort of within the department at Colorado State that we work in, some people are excited about doing media sort of stuff, and more of that outreach, and some people are less comfortable with it. And so that makes it hard to sort of do anything generalized and so it's just sort of, let's do it one on one if you know, this person is excited about this topic and they want to do some media outreach, we work together on a one on one basis and craft some of those talking points and can put together a pitch. I generally ask people because if someone is not really comfortable doing media, then they're probably not going to do as good of a job, or it's going to come across that their uncomfortable.

W

Whitney Pennington 14:59

Not that they won't do a good job, but they'll come across as uncomfortable. So we pretty much make it a one on one process and an individual event or an individual need process, and really letting the need and the framework and the modality of whatever it is we're trying to do drive how it is we communicate, because all of those, Who are you trying to reach? What avenue is it going to be? Where is it going to go? How long it's going to be? All of these different things will shape what the messages are, and letting that drive our approach and our strategy, which is a core communications principle, but it's still important.

L

Lisa Lundy 14:59

Yeah.

L

Lisa Lundy 15:36

Okay, we've talked a lot about the things that you've done, and some things that you've

Okay, we've talked a lot about the things that you've done, and some things that you've learned along the way. As you look toward the future, what are some things that you maybe you're hoping to try or new initiatives that you're looking forward to?

W

Whitney Pennington 15:50

To look ahead, one of the things that we want to really try to hone in on is, I think, thinking more regionally about our social media. Because you know, social media, we can get a lot of impressions, but they're worldwide. And so if we want to be more efficient and more effective at reaching our region, we need to figure out new ways to do that. We had a graduate student who just did a social media project, where she looked at the different extension social media pages on Facebook. So, extension, Farm Bureaus, and Departments of Agriculture, and was looking at how people interacted with those pages when they posted about safety topics. So trying to figure out who are those influencers, if you will, in the ag world, in our region? And what do we then need to do about building sort of offline partnerships, targeting folks within those organizations, so that we can build a partnership to create some social media campaign materials or assets that then they can share that will have a wider impact? Because our individual social medias, you know, from our account is not terribly efficient, and doesn't have the biggest reach. But if we can identify those who do and get engagement and that people do engage with, how can we do that offline work to have online success. So I think that's something we've always been working on, but to have had just completed a project where we did actually identify through some sort of strategic research who will be the best, and I'm looking forward to working on on that part. And then we're also in more of an outreach sense, we're going to be using social networking, analysis, social network analysis, to sort of look at our network of who we work with, and try to position ourselves more in the center of the network to build our connections, so that we can sort of say, okay, yes, we are being effective at disseminating this information out to our intermediaries, who are maybe the most influential within the network, and targeting those groups over common projects to I mean, to build our own influence, really, which sounds really business-y, but.

L


Lisa Lundy 18:09

Yeah, but like you, like you said, you want to be setting the tone and influencing the discussion. Well, what have I not asked you that our listeners might be interested to know about your work?


W

Whitney Pennington 18:22

I think the only, I mean, the only thing I would say is I've, you know, appreciated the ag center colleagues, and working within a network of people and listening to everyone's ideas. And we have, you know, being where we're located, we have a lot of overlap. There's a couple of centers who all serve the Dakotas. And I especially appreciate that those ag centers all see us as sort of synergistic in our work there, and often communicating. And we've gone to events together, and shared that responsibility and acknowledged that it's going to take all of us to make a change and move the needle and that we're not in any sort of competitive relationship. So being able to build those relationships with other communicators and learn from them and then actually work together, like physically be together, has been one of the things that I've really enjoyed about being part of an ag center.

 Lisa Lundy 19:15

Absolutely. Well, this was a great example of that today. Really appreciate you sharing your experience with me. And thank you for your time.

 Whitney Pennington 19:24

Yeah, thank you.

 Ricky Telg 19:28

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