

Beth Heller Interview

External Relations Manager, SHIELD Illinois

Tuesday, February 07, 2023 1:00PM • 47:10

SPEAKERS

Paul Gilbert II, Beth Heller

Paul Gilbert II 00:02

All right. Hi, my name is Paul Gilbert II, I'm a graduate student representing University of Illinois Archives, and today I'm joined by...

Beth Heller 00:13

Hi Paul, I'm Beth Heller. I'm the Senior Director for External Relations for SHIELD Illinois.

Paul Gilbert II 00:20

Today's date is February 7, 2023. We're meeting on Zoom to discuss Beth Heller's contributions in the fight against COVID-19 for inclusion in the University of Illinois COVID-19 Documentation Project. [Paul hears fire sirens in the distance.] I'm going to wait for...no, actually that fire truck is not leaving, okay. Okay, so I'm going to start off with a couple of background questions, for the sake of whoever's listening to this in the future. Could you tell us more about your background in marketing? Like, what are some of the expectations for someone in this line of work?

Beth Heller 01:02

Sure, well, I think my background in marketing did not necessarily—it did set me up for this job, but shockingly, so. My background is, I worked for Harry Caray's Restaurant Group for about 23 years. I went to University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and while I was there, and after I graduated, I was working at Harry Caray's, and I wound up being the Vice President of Marketing, running everything for our seven restaurants, catering company, and a sports museum. But when I came to SHIELD, what was needed was, you know, things I had done, but I also never imagined a career in healthcare. And it was really interesting—and I think everyone at SHIELD probably had a similar experience—to pivot from what we had done to pivot to what we had doing, which had never been done before. So it was a really unique group of people that all came together with their own experiences to make this experience happen.

Paul Gilbert II 02:03

Do you remember the first time you heard about the emergence of COVID-19? What were some of the feelings going through your mind at the time?

Beth Heller 02:12

I do remember. My husband is a physician and when we first learned about it, he said "we are, we're in trouble. We're here for a while. This is not going to be the 2-3 weeks that everybody's saying it's going to be, this is going to be a long time." And at that time, I had future events planned for my family and I had pretty quickly started to change them knowing that just based on my husband's background, that, you know, this was not going to be a short quarantine or a short pandemic.

Paul Gilbert II 02:46

It was very much like the old joke from World War One..."we'll be home by Christmas." Ehhh, I don't know about that. This was going to be in our lives for a while to say the least. So, at least according to your LinkedIn, after you left your position with Harry Caray restaurants, you went into consulting work. As your own boss effectively, how did COVID impact at your work, whether in terms of being able to meet with potential clients online or just as more general business things?

Beth Heller 03:38

COVID-19 pretty much shut down my company. I...a lot of the work I was doing was helping a lot of charities with events and working with athletes and doing things that were meant to be done in person. So there was a, you know, a good six months where I really didn't have a lot of projects going on. And it was interesting because I, as we all did, spent time with my family that I didn't have. I have two young boys, we all got to be together. We had dinner at the table. My mom actually was diagnosed with breast cancer and was not able to be treated anymore because she couldn't go into the hospital. They didn't want her in the hospital. So I got to spend extra amount of time with her. That was really great. And so I wasn't able to work with my clients. They weren't doing events, everything pretty much shut down.

Paul Gilbert II 04:35

So you didn't work from home at all? Considering COVID essentially put a pause on everything for six months.

Beth Heller 04:44

Yeah, pretty much everything was stopped. Most of my clients didn't have things going on. So I didn't work from home until I started with SHIELD. And that was in, you know September, October early—end of September, early October of '22.

Paul Gilbert II 05:01

Was that when SHIELD first appeared on your radar, or was there some communication before that?

Beth Heller 05:06

Yeah, I started talking to them in September. Someone reached out to me who works for the University of Illinois at UIUC. He said, "Hey, I don't really know much about this. But there's this testing thing going on. And they asked me for, you know, smart people, and I recommended you. Would you be able to talk to them?" And I promised myself that I would always talk to everyone. And I said, "Sure, seems strange, but I'm happy to talk to them." And so that's when I first talked to SHIELD and heard about it, when I met with Ron Watkins, who was our managing director. And he explained it to me and I couldn't jump on board faster.

Paul Gilbert II 05:45

So in an interview from a couple years ago, you described your work as connecting select brands and charities with influencers? In what ways would you say that prepared you to perform the role that you currently have with SHIELD, and in what ways is it different?

Beth Heller 06:06

Well, I was brought on to SHIELD to help on the external relations side. So I was helping talk to—specifically when I came on, I was talking to K through 12 schools. And that was my role, is to share that information with K through 12 schools and try to get them, you know, interested in the test to help them and help keep their kids in school and keep their community safe. So my role originally had nothing to do with any of that, really. But then, as I worked, they asked me to take the role of the senior director, which I agreed to. And in that role, I sort of created our marketing department and our PR department and all of that. And I took the things that I had been doing and used them for SHIELD. I'm not sure that they brought me to do that. I just saw a need. And so one of the things that I did is I—at the time, at this time, we had a lot of schools that had just signed up to test with SHIELD, because there were all these incentives coming from the state. So the state had introduced Test to Stay, which will allow kids to stay in school, excuse me, it would allow kids to stay in school if they tested and were exposed. So it really changed everything for the schools, because instead of sending someone home that was exposed, they could now stay in school, which is critical. And the other thing that happened is they offered free testing for every school in the state, which was great because the schools couldn't afford it. Even though we had a nonprofit cost recovery system created, it still cost money when you multiplied it out. And then the third thing that occurred was the governor's office issued an executive order requiring testing for all K through 12 students, or sorry, faculty that weren't vaccinated, and also public universities, for staff and students. So testing, demand exploded for us. And at that moment, we realized we had to get consent. So we had to get consent. Hi, for parents. So schools were signing up, but now we had to show parents that they needed to sign up and consent for their kids to get tested. So what I did was I partnered with—I was trying to think of ways to hit harder, impacted areas and communities—so I partnered with someone I thought was respected specifically in the Latino community, which is Wilson Contreras, who was a world series champion with the Chicago Cubs. So I reached out to his agent and partnered with him to do some campaign, an advertising campaign for us. And we went in and we targeted schools, areas that schools that had signed up with SHIELD in those areas, and we did billboard campaigns, we did radio ads, we did social ads. And we also partnered with the Chicago Red Stars, and the goal there was really to show that this was a test that could be trusted. The University of Illinois, it's Wilson Contreras, it's the Red Stars. You can trust our test and you should sign up for testing. So that was one thing that, you know, I was able to bring that I thought really, you know. Trust was important to get across and I think that helped.

Paul Gilbert II 09:23

On the subject of trust. How did your team use social media in particular to establish and build trust between being the SHIELD team and concerned parents and individuals? You mention how leveraging things celebrities, such as Wilson Contreras, were helpful as a person to person means of communication, but one of the advantages of social media is the fact that you can reach people outside of time and space constraints, in a way that person-person communication isn't as effective.

Beth Heller 10:11

So the question is, is how did we use social to build the trust?

Paul Gilbert II 10:15

Yes.

Beth Heller 10:17

Well, like you said, through the influencers that we brought on board. We also brought on board parent influencers, who would post about SHIELD and how they tested. And they thought that our testing, or testing in general, really, because in the beginning, that's what I was fighting is to test or not to test, not necessarily SHIELD or not SHIELD. So it was really talking about why testing was important, why all of the mitigations were important, right, so it was, you know, social distancing, masking, testing, isolating. All of those mitigations needed to happen together. So those parent influencers really helped us to target, you know, getting across that message. The other thing we did is, as schools were signing up—schools and school districts—we would post those school districts that were signing up. And what that did, it kind of showed everyone the breadth of it. It wasn't one school in the state of Illinois, it got up to, you know, close to 1,900 schools. And so we were really constantly out there, showing that this is something that many people were open to doing, and that it was helpful, and non-invasive.

Paul Gilbert II 11:35

So how much of an issue was disinformation and misinformation for you and the marketing team, and what steps did you take, besides the parents influencers, to try to overcome that?

Beth Heller 11:52

You know, there are a lot of voices on both sides. So we were never here to be convincing people of political feelings or anything, we were a testing vendor. So honestly, we tried to stay out of it. We were here to provide saliva based testing to keep kids in school, keep communities safe. And if people weren't interested, we never took the charge of "you must do this." We sort of tried to focus on what it is we did and what we could provide, and how we did it. Well, and you could trust us. So I think we tried not to get involved in any of that, you know, political noise.

Paul Gilbert II 12:40

Fair enough. Sometimes the only way to avoid getting mud on you is to just not get in the pen.

Beth Heller 12:51

That's right.

Paul Gilbert II 12:54

How did these strategies, when it came to using social media, differ when it came to public facing things versus meeting with potential clients, such as school districts across the state of Illinois?

Beth Heller 13:09

I'm not sure I understand the question.

Paul Gilbert II 13:12

So you mentioned how one of the ways that you use social media was to promote both parent influencers who had testimonials as well as, whenever a new school signed up, you would say, um—I don't know if they actually did partner with SHIELD, but just as an example—"Cicero Township school district just signed up for SHIELD testing." Would you say the strategies used in order to recruit and and promote public people were the same as you used when it came to connecting with school districts such as the one that I just made up?

Beth Heller 14:05

Sure. Sure. So yeah, yes, absolutely, they went hand in hand. One of my jobs was getting the word out as much as possible to all of the school districts, right. We did that on social media, like I said, promoting Cicero, you know, made up School District Cicero, agreed to do testing and putting that on made their neighbors pay attention and made other school districts pay attention. And then also, we're promoting it to the parents. So we did use social for both of those. But we also used other, many other ways, other than social to get that word across. And one of the key ways was with, you know, we partnered with IDPH and CDPH. And with IDPH, we were, our goal was to get the word out to everybody we could, whether it was through social, whether it was through a webinar, whether it was through, you know, I met with associations, you know, nurses associations. I wanted boots on the ground so that it wasn't just our voice talking, it was other people that could go and promote it, because I or my team can't be in every single school district. Although we were, but we can't be in every conversation. We needed people to sort of promote SHIELD and promote SHIELD testing, and we needed people like the nurses. So my hope was that we had people like the head of the nurse at Cicero district, whatever. And we had the superintendent from the other school district all watching and saying, "Hey, why are so many people doing this? I think I need to do it." And we also used social [media] as a way to share information. So you know, one is that school district X signed up, but also why testing is important. What is it you're going to get out of it, why it protects communities, maybe any kind of study that was released, click here to watch that. So it was it was very informational, too, and trying to, again, not talk about the political strife behind it, but really more of just testing is non-invasive and it saves lives. And it's very clear, and we are proven to be able to do that.

Paul Gilbert II 14:08

You briefly touched on the role that the Illinois Department of Public Health played in terms of promoting testing. What are some of the unique challenges of partnering with a state agency such as the State Department of Health or this city of Chicago's Department of Public Health?

Beth Heller 16:37

Well, and we are a state agency, too. It was my first foray into state agency, or state government, life, coming from small privately owned organizations, or even my own company where obviously, it's my own. I can't say enough positive things about the relationship we have and had with IDPH and CDPH. Even the Midwest Coordination Center, which was another federally funded program to help support testing. We all—and I just put together a case study actually, that talks about how the value of partnerships and why partnerships worked here, because without all of the four of us that I just mentioned, the three of them, plus us, we would never have been able to make this happen. You know, it required the University of Illinois system, UIUC developing the test, UI, University of Illinois system,

creating SHIELD Illinois, a nonprofit unit, rolling it out, us having cost recovery model, so that the test wasn't very expensive. And then partnering with IDPH, CDPH, and the MCC, to utilize their federal funding sources in order to offer free testing. Without all of that—and then us offering wraparound services, which some call end-to-end services, which means it's not just that we provided a test, we provided all the work that goes into the test. So we provided transportation, collection, you know, funding if you were doing it yourself and all these other really important services that not many states offered. And we would not have been able to do it without all of us together. And then the state of Illinois, you know, with these incentives that I mentioned earlier, such as test to stay. You know, that's when people signed up, the school district signed up when those types of things were happening. And if IDPH had not accepted that, you know, they were innovators, that was something that we've been talking about for a while, a little while that was being done in Massachusetts, maybe in other states, and IDPH said, "You know what, we need incentives," and SHIELD and IDPH worked very hand in hand on figuring out how that would work, how it would roll out, you know, communicating the information. And I can't say enough, we would not have been able to do it without that.

Paul Gilbert II 19:04

Could you talk more about the relationships that you and by extension SHIELD have forged with corporate partners? I think one of the more famous cases was the work that SHIELD has done with Rivian at their Normal [Illinois] facility. But I'm sure there's plenty other her success stories too.

Beth Heller 19:25

Are you looking for another one? Or talk more about Rivian?

Paul Gilbert II 19:31

Which one you prefer.

Beth Heller 19:34

Both, either. You know, it was interesting to watch Rivian with the testing because, you know, they were...they really saw value in testing. And they were trying to release a new car. And they couldn't release this car if they didn't have any workers on the line. And they knew that they needed to not have outbreaks and they knew that maybe their employees wouldn't wear masks, or maybe they did or, or they were congregating outside of—not in a bad way, just the way of the world. And they knew that if they tested often enough, they could catch outbreaks, send people home and keep people safe, and keep their line still flowing and producing cars. We actually produced a video at Rivian. They were kind enough to let us come in there one day, and as we were trying to show other companies what it looked like and how easy it was, they allowed us to film some of their employees drooling and doing the whole test. So that's a video you can find on our YouTube channel. We did that and we did a K through 12 one, just to show the two different sorts of scenarios, a kid versus an employee. So I just think they set such a standard for how to keep their employees safe. And they did a great job with it. You know, we worked, one other highlight to me of a great story is the federal courthouse here in the Northern District in Chicago. I worked with them from the beginning, you know, they had stopped jury trials. So people weren't getting their due time in court because they couldn't have a trial. They couldn't be in person. And so the clerk of the court, Thomas Bruton, he worked with us to get testing going, and they got juries back. You know, they were testing jury members. And if someone was positive, they couldn't

come in, you know, they're testing all of the employees, not letting them in the courthouse. And they really found so much value that they actually offered to host their own community testing site, which CDPH funded. And it was great because we had in the [Chicago] Loop, you know, around public transportation, it was easy to get to, accessible. They offered community testing site in some of the most critical time where rates were soaring. And it was really a valuable thing not just for you know, the courthouse jury trials, but also just for regular people to get a test.

Paul Gilbert II 22:11

Do you know off the top of your head what the YouTube channel for SHIELD is?

Beth Heller 22:17

I can look it up.

Paul Gilbert II 22:23

I think I found it. Is it SHIELDIllinois9539? Does that ring a bell?

Beth Heller 22:34

I've never typed it out. I always just search...um, yes, that's correct.

Paul Gilbert II 22:40

I mean, I'm sure that we have the videos archived in our broader video collection, but just in case whoever's listening to this in the future isn't aware, it's helpful to have it also embedded in the video...Ok, where was I? So this next question is particularly relevant to me as a former contractor with Chicago Public Schools at the time that the district announced that they would return to in-person classes and there was, to put a very mildly, a lot of concerns on the part of rank-and-file employees—how involved were you in the bidding process for CPS's COVID surveillance program? What details could you give us in terms of a peek behind the curtain?

Beth Heller 23:51

To be honest, we weren't really informed of anything. We were really only informed that they did not choose SHIELD. So we put together an RFP [request for proposal], part of the process, and were informed CPS did not choose SHIELD Illinois, so we didn't really get much look behind the curtain. And there wasn't really much more to it than that.

Paul Gilbert II 24:17

What about some of the Chicagoland schools that did go with the SHIELD? Was that something that you specifically reached out to them for?

Beth Heller 24:28

Yep, my team worked with—so, with CDPH specifically...so there were two buckets of funding from the federal funds. IDPH received money, specifically earmarked for testing and CDPH received money earmarked for testing and CPS received their own funding for testing through that. So CDPH partnered with SHIELD to offer testing for higher needed, areas that had higher need for testing. And they would decide who we could share free testing with and who, you know, wasn't yet on the list. But at some

point, let's just say in August or September, they extended it to every single school in the city of Chicago, public or private—outside of CPS, that was its own program. So yes, we worked hand in hand with CDPH on going to those schools, sharing the information with them, signing them up, everything that they needed. So that was sort of the CDPH sponsored program that was free for the schools was SHIELD Illinois.

Paul Gilbert II 25:36

Quick clarifying question. High schools outside of CPS—does that include charter schools in the city of Chicago?

Beth Heller 25:47

It does. So we had, we have tested in many charter schools in Chicago. All the bigger ones, Acero, et cetera.

Paul Gilbert II 26:00

Acero, Noble...

Beth Heller 26:02

Noble, yep. We provided their testing. And still do. At least in Acero, I know we're still testing.

Paul Gilbert II 26:16

So how did COVID, looking broad picture, impact your career goals? We talked earlier about how initially things with your consulting work hit a pause for the first couple months and pandemic, which may or may not have freed you up for the work you currently do with SHIELD.

Beth Heller 26:44

So how did this work affect my career goals?

Paul Gilbert II 26:47

Yes, I mean, if I remember correctly, you also said that you didn't have any plans on doing things in the broader focus healthcare field before this pandemic.

Beth Heller 27:02

Yeah, honestly, I don't, I wouldn't say it's affected my career goals at all. I think what it did for me, as a person, is it made me realize I can do anything I put my mind to, because it's, again, not something I would have, it's not a place that I would have imagined myself, in healthcare. But I know that my skills can translate to different fields. So I think that's what I learned, you know, this experience as a whole still fits into sort of what I do, which are passion projects that make me give back, allow me to give back, and help other people. So that's, if I were to take my consulting company and think about what I do, that's what I do is, I like to give back. Any group I work with always has to have some kind of charity tied to it for me to want to be involved. And this was, I wouldn't say charity, but you know, it was it was very hard work. Making sure people were safe and it was work that I think every one of our employees at SHIELD feels extremely proud that they're a part of. So I think this probably will stay them, this will

stay with me for my entire life, this experience, and changed me in the sense of, you know, just being able to help so many people feels great.

Paul Gilbert II 28:25

I think I have a good descriptor for that idea of like giving back. Would you describe this as like, public service?

Beth Heller 28:37

Absolutely. Yeah. You know, many of us gave up things to be a part of this. And you know, I mean, we were working—I mean I can't speak for everyone—but I was working 80, 90 hours a week, you know, for a year plus. Sitting in this chair, not moving. Not necessarily taking my kids where they—I took them, but I was really focused on this. I mean, I was waking up and getting on Zoom meetings at 7am and being done at 11pm daily. And you know, it is taking a lot of things from your life to give to the public and I was, never complained I was very happy about it. It was really wonderful public service work that all of us have done and we all jumped in and did everything we could do, you know.

Paul Gilbert II 29:28

"Kids, I'm making the world safe for you." Speaking of which, how much of your work with SHIELD would you say, especially since you were initially brought on to work with K through 12 schools, do you think was colored by your experiences as a parent? Do you think that gave you a greater lens into what feelings and concerns other parents were experiencing at the time?

Beth Heller 30:05

Absolutely. Not just from my own experience with my kids, which was very important, because I saw how my kids wanted to be, or needed to be, and how comfortable I felt, if they got tested, or if the people around them got tested, and then we were all together. So I had life experiences, for sure, that really allowed me to understand it in a different way. But also my friends who had kids, right, so I'm obviously in a network of people that also are like me, or different than me. And I could see what they're, you know, pains were, or strengths were, what was important to them, and what wasn't important to them. And I had sort of had, have, a network of people that I can roll ideas off of, and really try to understand what they're feeling about testing or the pandemic. The other thing that really helped me is, my kids school, I was on the Board of Trustees at the time that I started with SHIELD, I was in my sixth year. And I, I ended my term after that sixth year. But that really helped me as I spoke with schools, because I had the board perspective. So I understood how the board would react—not every board, every school is different. As we can see in Illinois, very different, differing opinions throughout our state. But I could understand at least how it worked. And so I think when I spoke with the superintendent, whoever's in charge of testing, the nurse, you know, all the different people I spoke with, the head of the association, the head of the union, the head of whatever, I had perspective from both those points.

Paul Gilbert II 31:41

In a sense, being able to speak not only as a parent, but as someone who has been on pretty much every side of the table, except for a teacher, it really helped you when it came to, "okay, here's the

language I need in order to get through to this person." Versus, "okay, I need to speak with my parent hat on on with this person." Would you say that's a fair summation?

Beth Heller 32:10

Absolutely.

Paul Gilbert II 32:14

What have been some of the most challenging parts of the pandemic? I think one of the ones that you mentioned just now was the long hours that you put in in the name of public service?

Beth Heller 32:26

That's correct.

Paul Gilbert II 32:28

Were there any others that—

Beth Heller 32:31

—Well, at that time, you know, I remember one of the school districts. So you know, I started with SHIELD in September, October 2020. And then all of this, sort of, big hit of school signing up wasn't until August of 2021. So my job in that time was spent, we had a test. And we had to go out and we had to—or we went out—and we tried to educate people on why they should use the test. And some signed up, you know, we were doing we were in, you know, a couple hundred locations by the mid summer. Very manageable, you know, we had set up the company to scale and we're waiting for the scale to happen. I think what was hard was that, from that time, through the time where everything exploded, I was like, trust me, this program is something you want to use. And not everybody was on board, you know, and they weren't on board, maybe because the board didn't agree or maybe because they had vocal parents that didn't agree or whatever the reason was, that didn't fit their community. But when it happened, and it exploded, people were begging me to get signed up. Begging, right. So all of a sudden, hundreds of school districts, which is you know, some school districts of 40 schools, were begging me to get on and I remember one superintendent said to me, "Beth, can you give me the Disney Fast Pass." Because he wanted to just start tomorrow. And the process of SHIELD is not a "snap your fingers and start tomorrow," there's work that has to get done to set up. Such as registering the students, getting consent, you know, it's, at minimum, probably a two week turnaround time. So it was hard because I knew this program was the right program and it took these incentives, which is what we were building up for, so it all made sense. But it took all that to happen for people to try it out and realize "you're right, this is so helpful."

Paul Gilbert II 34:32

Very much a "We are a stove, not of microwave. You can't just flip us on and expect things to go. We have to get up to operating temperature, get all the procedures done the right way in order for things to turn out in a way that's beneficial all of us."

Beth Heller 34:52

That's right. And having most school districts sign up at the exact same time. We had to staff up, you know, we had built for this, but we didn't know this explosion would happen at that exact moment. So again, we built for scaling. And then we scaled, we made so many changes. Our goal was to reduce barriers. So as a barrier arrived, arose, we tried to reduce it, if we could, or remove it. And so, you know, that's what was happening at that time is, you know, any issue, okay, can we solve it? Great, let's remove it, so.

Paul Gilbert II 35:27

So what would you say, as a team, would be some of your greatest success stories? Whether it's partnering with almost 2,000 schools in the state of Illinois, or being able to successfully ramp things up when everybody is coming in at once saying, "Give us the SHIELD test, please, give me the Fast Pass," so to speak.

Beth Heller 35:35

You know, the groundwork that we did, up into that moment, you know, that the day that—let's just say it was one day where everything exploded, which wasn't, but—we put so much work into educating people, they heard us, they listened to us. We hit so many different organizations and I feel so proud that people knew who we were and knew what we did, even before they signed up. So when that moment sort of snapped, everyone's like, "Oh, yeah, SHIELD. I already know what it is. I've listened to Beth speak 7,000 times on different things." So I feel proud that I, I and we, sort of reached the whole state. I think, at one point, I mean, I had met with almost every superintendent in the state. And it was really a proud moment to know that the work we had done, all that effort we put in, meant something. You know, and just, as we built community testing sites, and you'd hear, you know, we got letters, hearing from schools, or parents saying, "Thank you," you know, "we couldn't have done this without you. We couldn't have gotten our kids back in school without you." Or sports, right? Like, we had to explain to people why testing was important to keep the basketball team playing. Because if you caught the one person that's positive, then you save all the other people. And so trying to educate people to understand that it wasn't like, "Oh, Johnny or Jacqueline isn't going to play," but yet, "it means your team can play." You know, so it was a lot of education of trying to have people understand that testing keeps less people from being positive and allows you to do the things you want to do. And keeps grandma safe.

Paul Gilbert II 37:41

Yeah. Granted, this probably would have been more beneficial at the beginning of the pandemic versus where we are now just because of the passage of time. But the example I keep coming back to is Rudy Gobert, the NBA player who famously said COVID was a joke, start touching a bunch of microphones all over the place. And then he got sick. And the NBA season was postponed because of it—um, simply saying to parents, testing is important so that your kids can continue to play and they don't miss out on their opportunities to gain all the benefits of team competition, such as team building, a sense of camaraderie, maturity, all the other things that we love and appreciate about team sports because of—

Beth Heller 38:47

—and mental health—

Paul Gilbert II 38:49

—mental health, too. For a lot of the players, sports are a respite from the other things going on in their lives, and especially at the high school and college level, that may be their only access to mental health care is through team doctors or a team of psychiatrists.

Beth Heller 39:15

That's right. I agree with you.

Paul Gilbert II 39:20

So you mentioned that one of the things that you learned about yourself was that you grew to appreciate about yourself over the course of your work with SHIELD is just how transferable your skills were from your time working with the charities and similar clients to the space that you currently have. What are some of the other major takeaways you have about either yourself or the University that you want to include to the record?

Beth Heller 40:02

Well, I think the SHIELD unit was so different than the regular operations of the university and the system, because generally, I think things move slower from what I understand. The system or even just one of the three universities. SHIELD was sort of its own beast, and did its own thing, because it had to. It had to move fast, it had to react quickly, or we weren't able to save lives. Our turnaround time had to be under 24 hours, or it, testing made no sense. And we saw that happen. During the height of, you know, Omicron, we saw testing programs returned results in sometimes three days, sometimes seven days, sometimes zero days, because they expired. And if we didn't move as fast as we moved—and we average about 16 hours from collection to result—we knew that was really important. So I can't, you know, my working with the University and with the system is through SHIELD and in that light, I saw a fluid, moving, working startup that built itself from the beginning and from scratch, and turned into an organization with 300 plus employees, you know, running 7 million tests, and, you know, resulting many positive, saving many lives. And then now, you know, as we segue into, we are a university, so as we segue into educating and giving a lot of professional development to the people we've hired, that's sort of our focus, one of our focuses right now is, how do we take this wonderful group of people who worked so hard and how do we give them all the tools and resources that they need to be, be better employees learn as much as they can, and give them all that those tools. So I think what I learned, as I say, that is just the resource of having the University of Illinois System behind this startup is huge. I've never seen a company like this, I've never seen, the way that our employees are treated from the top down is so positive and helpful and about them. And it's...I've just never seen it. And I know that's because of the connection with the university.

Paul Gilbert II 42:26

Something that I think will make you feel very happy to hear, if you haven't heard this already, is, when we interviewed President Killeen, he spoke very glowingly about just how surprised he was at the University's ability, namely SHIELD, to go into warp speed to meet the challenge that was COVID-19 head on. I think his exact words were, "I didn't know that's when the chips were down, not only we could go headfirst into some of the issue, but be able to respond to the issue as quickly, as effectively as we did." I mean, another team at the University of Illinois developed an emergency ventilator system

over the course of a week right before all their labs got shut down now, because they knew that it was going to become a supply chain issue. So they need to come up with a cheaper, easier to manufacture ways to get people ventilated. Avijit Ghosh, the since departed Vice President of the University System, started ordering PCR tests before the university shut down in order to facilitate SHIELD's rapid growth...just a lot of foresight, and ability to hit the ground running thing, I think is my, as well as the President's, main take away from the pandemic.

Beth Heller 44:14

I agree. And I think, again, being fresh eyes into the University System, and as I've learned how, not just U of I, but all these institutions work. It's really incredible that we were able to do what we did, and I really attribute it to, of course, President Killeen, but Ron Watkins. He just took the reins, and he's like, "I've got this and I'm going to do it this way. And we're going to all do it. We're going to be supportive to our team and we're going to move quickly and," you know, he worked so tirelessly. I have such an incredible amount of respect for how hard he's worked, and how again, you think about the boots on the ground mentality. He laid the groundwork for this mentality that's trickled down to all those 300 employees, and I just, it's his leadership that has allowed us to move fast, swiftly, thoughtfully, you know, successfully, trustworthy, and allow ourselves time to build now this team to help them, because we're, you know, going to shut down. So we now have a whole team of employees that have to go look for another job. And we need to help them.

Paul Gilbert II 45:28

So, is there anything else that you want to cover in the time we have with you, that we haven't discussed before?

Beth Heller 45:39

Um, let me think about that for a moment. I think we covered. You asked great questions. And I think I think we covered pretty much everything, because you're talking to other people, obviously, in other departments, and I think they all, all this pieces together. But I would just say that I've never worked with a group of people like this, who all had the same mission, which is helping to protect others. And because of that, they had a different type of work ethic. And it showed. And I think that's how we were able to get all this done is so many people that just wanted to help and they gave their all and they're still giving their all and it was incredible really.

Paul Gilbert II 46:38

Thank you for the compliment on the questions. I believe that's everything that we have for you today. Thank you so much for sitting down with us and thank you in advance for sharing that document documenting SHIELD's history from those who created it and support the program from the inside.

Beth Heller 47:04

It's my pleasure.

Paul Gilbert II 47:07

All right, Jessie. You can end the recording