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Interviewee: Jennifer Hintzsche Westphal
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Oral History of Hinckley Residents - Transcription

Addie: Can you describe your experience growing up in Hinckley?

Jennifer: I grew up on a little farm on Rimsnider Road, west of town. My grandma Miller owned a hair salon in town and grandpa was mayor of Hinckley for awhile. My mom helped run the Voss car dealership in town and my dad and my uncles ran the family agricultural company called Hintzsche Feed and Grain. I had 19 cousins and only three of us were girls so I grew up like a tomboy. I played soccer most of my life and I was the only girl on the guys' soccer team up until high school. My first job was at the Dairy Joy but I didn't last long. I could never get the right amount of swirl on the cone. Of course we went to the Dairy Joy to hang out. There wasn't as many restaurants then so we also hung out on back roads or at our friends' houses.

Addie: What was your high school experience like?

Jennifer: When I was growing up, Hinckley and Big Rock had separate grade schools and classes were not combined until high school. We didn't know the kids from Big Rock until our freshman year. Thank God we didn't have social media then. Our class in high school was double the size it had been but still only about 63 kids. I loved science and history classes and was involved in like every possible thing I could be in. I spread my time between marching band and three varsity sports. There was always parades, practice, and tons of stuff to do. On my lunch breaks, I would like go shoot free throws or go take corner kicks. I really only cared about sports during those years. We made it to the Sweet 16 in basketball my sophomore year.

Addie: What did you do after high school?

Jennifer: Watching my dad run our family's agricultural business for over half a century, showed me the value of hard work and dedication. I enrolled at Northern Illinois University in biology but was only getting Cs. Up until then, learning in school had come easy so I didn't really know how to study. I figured it out and went on to grad school but soon discovered I did not like the lab work but was good at the electron microscope and computers. So I switched to the new field of bioinformatics which is like software development answering biological questions. I was the first individual to receive a Ph.D. from NIU in that field. I then went on to work at the University of Colorado where I wanted to work on cancer genomics.

Addie: Why did you have a special interest in cancer research?

Jennifer: I knew that what I was doing, sequencing DNA, could apply to so many fields. So it kind of evolved into like, what can I do with this skill set that I now enjoy? I wanted to work in cancer research because three of my four grandparents died of cancer when I was in college and then my dad was diagnosed with prostate cancer. But research at the university depends on getting grants and I wanted more security.

Addie: Tell us about the interactive social media competition you won while you were at the University of Colorado.

Jennifer: It was an American Idol-style contest conducted by 'I'm a Scientist USA' where students in grades 5-12 vote for their favorite among five scientists. We filled out profiles so the students could see the type of work that we did and what we did for fun. The students could go on the organization's website and post questions for a specific scientist and also chat with us via their classroom computers. It was a really a cool opportunity.

Addie: What did you do with your prize money?

Jennifer: I used it to return to Hinckley and talk with students in school. I never knew any real scientists growing up and I never thought I would be a scientist. Actually, two of my younger cousins were in the science classes I talked to, so that made it extra special. We talked about what it is like to be a scientist, about melanoma and DNA sequencing, and how I can use computers to try to find out what's wrong with a tumor and see how we can fix it. The best part is melanoma is not a pretty disease, and I have a feeling a lot of those students didn't argue with their parents about wearing sunscreen anymore.

Addie: Tell us about the time you and Ryan decided to have a family?

Jennifer: My husband Ryan and I were ready to start our family in 2017. That was when I was diagnosed with unexplained infertility. It's not an unusual diagnosis as statistics show one in five women have difficulty to conceive after a year of trying. We refused to accept the diagnosis, so I used my Ph.D. degree in biology to look for alternatives to the expensive procedure recommended by my doctor.

Addie: How proud are you that you were able to find a solution to your barrier to motherhood?

Jennifer: I found a non-invasive solution that had the same live birth rate in trials as the recommended clinical treatment. I went into problem-solving mode and used my bioinformatics education to build my own intracervical insemination kit. You know, when you're told you're not gonna be a mom, and then you are, all these weird aspects of your life come together. I was just so grateful. And then, I didn't talk about my infertility when I was going through my pregnancy. We had a daughter and then my son was born 380 days after my daughter. So Ryan and I joke that it worked so well; it worked twice.

Addie: But you didn't stop there; how did you try to share this product with others?

Jennifer: I put up a website and made 200 proof-of-concept product kits, just to see what would happen. I called it PherDal which is a hilarious, made-up name because they told me I was infertile and I used my PhD to prove them wrong. We sold out in 90 days. But to get FDA (federal Food and Drug Administration) approval to market the product we were told we would need research trials that would cost a million dollars. We didn't have access to that kind of resources so we turned to online crowd-funding equity where people could buy shares of our company to own it and help fund it through the FDA approval process. I'm so thankful to the Hinckley community and others who bought shares in our company so we could conduct the trials. We were successful and FDA gave their approval in 2023.

Addie: Didn't you also get a boost from a Time Magazine article?

Jennifer: Almost a year after the FDA approval, PherDal was named one of "The Best Inventions of 2024" by TIME. So it really helped on that front to be known. And once enough people tried it and people are now having their babies, they're talking about it more. Word of mouth is really powerful. I'm proud of it.

Addie: What's ahead for your company?

Jennifer: I never want to stop chasing the joy I feel from hearing from those parents. We are gearing up to be able to expand our supply chain and partnerships to make sure every person has an accessible at-home fertility option they can try. People think infertility is cured with a child. It's not. I'm grateful every single day for the children I was told I wouldn't have, but the infertility trauma didn't go away because of them. I know this pain. I understand how it consumes you, breaks you down, and can wreck your relationship with yourself and your partner. Knowing I helped someone from experiencing at least some of that pain keeps me going. Having an inbox full of baby pictures is also pretty motivating. I also like to speak at conferences about my experiences in starting a business, sharing information about infertility, and using my scientific expertise to empower more change and innovation in women's health issues.

Addie: When you came back to Hinckley recently, did it feel different?

Jennifer: I think it felt bigger when I came back. Maybe it was just because of the school. I returned when the school named the soccer field after Larry Peppers who had been my coach and history teacher. They asked me to speak about Doc, his teaching style, and friendship over the years. It made me try to remember all the teachers, classmates and events I had experienced and what had happened since graduation. It was just cool; never thought it would like really matter that much when I was growing up.