

# JRMC | Journal of Regional Medical Campuses

## **Imagination, the First Virtual Meeting**

Anna Wirta Kosobuski, EdD and Richard G. Melvin, PhD

Journal of Regional Medical Campuses, Vol. 3, Issue 3 (2020)

[z.umn.edu/JRMC](http://z.umn.edu/JRMC)

All work in JRMC is licensed under CC BY-NC



## Imagination, the First Virtual Meeting

Anna Wirta Kosobuski, EdD and Richard G. Melvin, PhD

### Abstract

Two regional medical school faculty have a meeting of the minds as they seek ways to stop the spread of COVID-19. A combination of expertise and imagination resulted in entertaining kid-friendly information to promote COVID-19 awareness and prevention practices. What started as a seemingly small health promotion project for children quickly blossomed into an impactful, far-reaching venture that cuts across distance, cultures, and disciplines as the resources travel regionally and internationally, are translated to multiple languages, and evolve into new, cutting edge COVID-19 research and innovative methods of providing supportive services for youth in a Native American community.

What can we do to help? A question that we've heard time and again since March 2020, when it became clear that COVID-19 had crept its way to the United States, making its presence known by turning so many of our societal norms upside down and sideways. We were hit by a ton of bricks then tossed into the middle of a hurricane.

For the past couple of years, the 2 of us enjoyed the balance our areas of expertise brought to projects. An internationally trained evolutionary geneticist and an Ojibwe/Finnish woman whose winding path led her to a late-in-life education doctorate, but both with a deep-seated love of learning and sharing the captivating world of science with Native American kids. And that was our common ground, the root of what in the eyes of some might be an unlikely partnership. Both of us care deeply about using and sharing our professional knowledge in ways to assist those who want what we have to offer. We hope that by providing people with the information that they request we can help make a real difference in their lives and those of people their communities. We have been able to do this "as 2 complementary alleles", quips the geneticist.

Like so many other people around us, one day we asked one another, what can we do to help others in these unsettled times? We turned to our common, complementary strength and simply asked, what would help the kids? And so, it began. In the middle of the torrential chaos of finding our entire nation in need of toilet paper, hand sanitizer, and face masks, layered upon temporary school and business closures, shifting work schedules or in some cases, all out loss of work, our fear was that children might be lost in the shuffle. We thought, if grown-ups are finding themselves without all the

tools they need to fully cope and adjust, how about the little ones?

Believing that children were trying to make sense of all that was going on, and that they too were trying to make decisions, we began to think about our experiences during some of our past activities with kids when we help them see how science deepens the fascinating nature of our everyday lives. The kids usually ask questions fueled by equal parts understanding and imagination. We asked ourselves, what are some of the questions they ask? And specifically, if we were talking about COVID-19, what would be some of their questions?

Presenting and discussing the topic was out of the question. Moreover, school leaders were in the midst of trying to find a workable recipe for effective methods of delivering daily core classroom requirements and certainly didn't need us in their way to top off their already wildly stressful days. We decided to take the route of creating short, informational COVID-19 resources that presented the topic in eye-catching, kid-friendly formats. Now, if this is our goal, just what does COVID-19 look like? To fully flesh this out we pulled together our project team, including the gifted artist with an uncanny knack of turning all things to magic, and worked furiously over the next couple of weeks to turn out the materials in time so schools could get them in the hands of the kids. What followed was nearly as unexpected as the pandemic itself. Our resources, *Germs! Germs! Germs!* and *COVID-19? Answers for Kids* provided overviews of the virus and pandemic using an imaginative approach that depicted the virus as a stubborn creature with its hands poised on its waist, steadfast on world domination unless we face and fight it. Knowing from experience not everyone has the means for

**Anna Wirta Kosobuski, EdD;** University of Minnesota Medical School Duluth Campus, Duluth, MN

**Richard G. Melvin, PhD;** University of Minnesota Medical School Duluth Campus, Duluth, MN

Corresponding author: Anna Wirta Kosobuski, EdD

Assistant Professor, Department of Biomedical Sciences

University of Minnesota Medical School Duluth Campus

1035 University Drive

Duluth, MN 55812

Email: [awirta1@d.umn.edu](mailto:awirta1@d.umn.edu)

Cell: 715-817-4995



or even the desire of internet access, we sent paper copies to Native American community partner schools for dissemination. The school, kids, and entire communities loved them, and it was clear that the need was there. We had them set up for digital download to allow ease of access and expansive dissemination. We spread the word to professional and community contacts. The news snowballed as people shared them far and wide on Facebook and throughout their own networks. Before we knew it, they were national, and then international as they traveled on up to Canada and via Twitter to colleagues and teachers as far away as Australia and Yorkshire, England. Very quickly, the request came that our COVID-19 resources be made available in additional languages as communities throughout Minnesota were in dire need of digestible resources but had few options other than the cold hard and uninterpreted facts provided by the Centers for Disease Control literature and website. A quick search for translators and soon we had Somali, Hmong, and Spanish versions of our work.

Requests for materials and printed copies for dissemination kept coming. Interestingly, though the English-versions of printed copies ran out fast, we were over the top with excited delight when those prepared for Somali communities were requested even more quickly. We are now on our third order of reprints of both versions.

The demand for materials and the outpouring of feedback told us not only how desperately trustworthy and accurate community resources were needed, but also how much people enjoyed our creative, friendly presentation of COVID-19 information. We were urged to expand our project. Time for round 2. We partnered up with a fellow faculty member who shares our ideal of putting knowledge and expertise to use to empower communities. The next set of materials spun off on subtopics of the first: one on face masks and social distancing, *Whiz Kidz! Amazing Facts About COVID-19 Face Masks and Social Distancing*, and a second, *COVID-19, Clean Hands Mythbusters* that addresses the efficacy of wearing gloves to help stop COVID-19's spread. In addition to these, we put the daily news updates of the virus spread to work by placing it at the center of a fun mathematics lesson, *Flatten the Curve*, that translates the real-life experience of COVID-19's spread into problem solving and graphing. We plan to use this lesson in our future activities with children and make it publicly available to teachers for use in their classrooms nationwide.

Like the COVID-19, what started out as our little project soon took on a life of its own and has evolved and presented new and sometimes unexpected scenarios. Dr. Melvin thinks of the images of the virus that were conjured up by artist, when he is talking to community officials about the presence of the virus in wastewater and at public beaches. He finds community communication of the information in COVID-19 graphs is more accessible through imagining the virus as a character in our story with its own motives and flaws. Dr. Wirta Kosobuski called on her newfound knowledge and

incorporated ideas born in the deluge of community feedback and identifications of priority needs regarding COVID-19 education to design a new project that expands her longstanding partnership with an area tribal community in exciting directions. In a similar vein as our materials for kids, the new community project is in response to the impact of COVID-19 on young people. Dr. Wirta Kosobuski and her community partner dreamed up and implemented an innovative, holistic, culturally based virtual mental health group support program for Native American adolescents. What's next? Nobody knows, but what is certain is that we'll meet whatever life throws us with our same unwavering love of the adventures of learning and our shared tendency to, at times, think, imagine, and laugh like kids.

Whether you find yourself interested or even mildly curious, all of our COVID-19 materials for kids can be viewed and downloaded at <https://conservancy.umn.edu/>. Search Wirta Kosobuski or Melvin.

#### **Acknowledgements:**

We would like to thank and acknowledge our fellow faculty member, Glenn Simmons, Jr., team member Rachel King-Siert, and illustrator, Jordan Rodgers.