

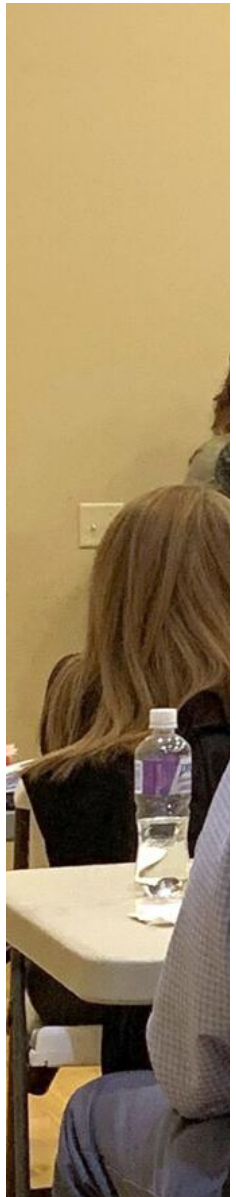
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WEDNESDAY'S WOMAN

Doing what's best for public health

BECCA OWSLEY The News-Enterprise

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Sara Jo Best p
Submitted phot

Sara Jo Best, director of public health with the Lincoln Trail District Health Department, works to inform and manage health in a six-county region.

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In recent months, Sara Jo Best found herself leading in public health during a worldwide pandemic.

She currently serves as the public health director at the Lincoln Trail District Health Department.

A 1993 Central Hardin High School graduate, she graduated from Western Kentucky University focusing on health care administration and went back to get her masters degree in public health.

She met her husband, Jeff, when she was 17 and they've been married 21 years. They found out later that when they were children, they were in a wedding together. She was the flower girl and he was the ring bearer.

As public health director, she oversees the day-to-day operation of the departments as well as the financial aspects of the departments in six counties: Hardin, LaRue, Marion, Meade, Nelson and Washington. She oversees 84 employees in a variety of departments that include childhood immunizations, food inspections, disease investigation, early parenting programs and health policy.

“The work is diverse and as we strive to reach every stage of life and be responsive to what the major risks are to health and safety within our community,” she said.

She started work at LTDHD in 2002 as the first health educator for Hardin County.

“I was so excited,” she said. “I wanted to work for the health department and was thrilled that I got the job here in the community I wanted to live in.”

In 2003, she became the preparedness department director.

In that role, she helped prepare for public health emergencies such as disease outbreaks and natural disasters. This is one of the roles that helped prepare her to lead the department through COVID-19.

“We wrote disaster response plans, exercised mocked disasters and sometimes responded to real events,” she said. “I was lucky enough to be deployed on a Kentucky Public Health Strike Team to assist Mississippi after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.”

In 2008 she was emergency appointed as the environmental director and formally was hired for the job in 2009.

“This job taught me so much about public health laws, the enforcement side of the house and working directly in the field with the public,” she said.

Shortly after stepping in that role an ice storm hit the region.

“My department was assuring the safety of food, water and shelters in an effort to prevent a secondary disaster,” she said.

At that time, she thought the ice storm was her toughest event to lead through at the health department.

“Little did I know what would be coming with COVID,” she said, adding that experience was critical to preparing her as public health director, which she became in 2013.

Terrie Burgan, health promotion manager and public information officer, said Best has common sense and is smart, compassionate and unwavering.

“Sara Jo works and fights hard for the communities she serves,” Burgan said. “Her standards are high and she expects no less from the staff she feels privileged to lead.”

As a result of Best’s leadership, Burgan said LTDHD is prepared to meet current and future challenges.

Best is the president of the Kentucky Health Department’s Association which represents all the local public health directors across Kentucky and is a past president of the Kentucky Public Health Association.

“I love public health and all it stands for,” Best said. “It was a match really to my faith.”

She said public health values all life and work, everyone matters.

“It is an environment of teamwork where diversity is celebrated,” she said. “Each one brings a unique perspective to the table that makes us that much better.”

She calls her staff the best in Kentucky, and inspirational.

“The biggest challenge for public health is the lack of knowledge of what we do for our community,” she said. “We are happy to be in the background doing our work, but when you do that consistently people don’t always value you or see you as a needed resource.

As an example, Best wonders if anyone knew about contact tracing before COVID-19. Public health, she said, has been contract tracing for years for health issues such as tuberculosis, hepatitis, pertussis and sexually transmitted infections.

“I think sometimes there is a sense of security that someone is making sure things are safe, but they don’t realize that many times it’s your local health department through our environmental or surveillance programs,” she said.

Now, she finds her self leading a public health department in the middle of a global pandemic.

“If it was going to happen, I should have known it would be when I was director,” she joked. “Actually, we know that these occur every 100 years so it shouldn’t have been as much as a shock as it was.”

She thinks all of her experiences with district and the people she has worked with helped her lead in these circumstances.

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Getting to know Sara Jo Best

Family: Best and her husband,

Jeff, have two sons, Ethan, 17,

and Owen, 12.

Favorite movie: “Dirty Dancing.”

Favorite TV show: “Dateline.”

Pets: Three dogs and two cats.

Favorite music: Rock ‘n Roll.

Favorite food: Anything salty.

Favorite sports: University of

Louisville basketball.

Becca Owsley

Becca Owsley is a features reporter at The News-Enterprise.