



UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS SYSTEM

WELLNESS CONNECTION

LIVE WELL. WORK WELL.

MAY 2022



EMPLOYEE SPOTLIGHT - Dena Lawrence, Ed.M., University Academic Programs & Services

By Erik Olson

Q. When did you start with the University of Illinois System and what was your interest in taking your current position?

A. I started at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign in 2005, then came to work for the U of I System in 2007. I've been in my current position since 2010. I work in University Academic Programs and Services as a senior project coordinator. I am most known for my role as the Illinois MyCreditsTransfer coordinator. I consider myself very lucky; I truly love my job!

Q. What does the term “wellness” mean to you?

A. Pre-COVID I would've had a stock answer about health and living a balanced life. However, as an extrovert in **every** way (socially, emotionally, learning-style, etc.), who lives alone, the increased isolation of COVID took a terrible toll on my overall wellness. I still get choked up thinking about that first year. It sounds a little silly to say I suffered. Afterall, I didn't get COVID nor did I lose loved ones to it.

All the challenges of 2020 stripped away my support system and coping mechanisms when I needed them most. I stayed cooped up in my house. I was far too sedentary and gained weight. I am diabetic, so both those things are bad. I felt fragile and on edge all the time. I wasn't sleeping well. I was struggling with my emotional well-being.

While 2020 was a terrible year, it taught me a lot about my personal wellness. For me, any definition of wellness now must include physical touch and affection, hugs, real face-to-face time with friends and family, and purpose that draws me out of my home every day.

Q. When you think about ways to promote wellness, what activities or exercises do you use?

A. I think of UI Stride! To give credit where credit is due, our leader – Julian Parrott – encouraged me to get involved in the System Office Wellness Committee and then in UI Stride. He asked me to consider being our UAPS “team captain” for the 2021 UI Stride campaign. I thought he was nuts, but I'm glad he suggested I join! It's no exaggeration to say that was transformative for me. Who knew that getting 10,000 steps a day would turn out to be a magic elixir that improved so many things in my life?

Engaging in enough activity to achieve 10,000 steps was the tipping point. It impacted everything. I had more energy. I slept better. It improved my ability to concentrate and my emotional well-being. It helped my weight-loss efforts. It brought down my blood sugar and blood pressure. It was amazing! Most of all, it gave me back a light-hearted hopefulness that was absent through the trials and tribulations of 2020.

Q. Do you think these activities help with your work life? If so, how?

A. Yes, definitely! I already loved my job and I appreciate it even more now. The resources and opportunities it afforded me in support of overall wellness have been fantastic.

