Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Good oral health is so important, because that's all now being tied to heart conditions, and that constant inflammation to so many other conditions. And so, being able to go in and take care of your teeth, your gums, it's absolutely critical for your overall health.

Julie W. McKee:
It really is. And one of our mantras in my program is, "Oral health and all health." And then the joke mantra is, "World peace through oral health." Because we think we can do it.

Julianne Hatton:
Hello, and welcome to CHFS Community, a podcast about health and wellbeing for CHFS employees across the Commonwealth, hosted by Secretary Eric Friedlander, broadcasting from Frankfort, Kentucky.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Hello, CHFS, this is your Secretary, Eric Friedlander. And with me today, I have Julie McKee, a dentist for the Cabinet, who sits in Public Health, really looks at dentistry from a Public Health perspective. But Julie and I first got to know each other when I was working in the Office of the Inspector General, right?

Julie W. McKee:
That's correct. We sure did. And that's been a few months ago.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Yes. Let's say a few months. It's been a while longer than that, because we both have a long tenure in this Cabinet.

Julie W. McKee:
Well, we count up our service time in months. We can refer to this as, it's been a few months.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Yes. I like that. I like that perspective. That's very good. So, Julie, when we met, you were coming into the Cabinet, and I think you started in the Office of the Inspector General, right?
Julie W. McKee:
That's correct. Well, I came from the Governor's Office actually.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Right.

Julie W. McKee:
Yeah.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Right.

Julie W. McKee:
To the Inspector General's Office, yes.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
So that was good. But you came in already having a pretty good career, right?

Julie W. McKee:
I did. I was what we call a drill and fill dentist in the foothills of Appalachia, Mount Sterling, for 10 years. And yada, yada, yada, sold my practice, it was meant to be, and went to the Governor's Office, and then went to the Inspector General's Office from there, and spent a couple of years there, and really got an appreciation of why regulations have to be the way they are and worded the way they are. Because in the line of work that I was involved with, with the Inspector General's Office, those statutes and regulations were the only thing that stood between too many of our Kentuckians and dying.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Right. Right.

Julie W. McKee:
So I appreciate that.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Me, too. That was my role, remember?

Julie W. McKee:
Yes, I do.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
You could say I was the author of all the red tape out of the Inspector General's Office.
Julie W. McKee:
Right, right. Which you contributed to the Inspector General's Office regulating what? different-

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Oh, yeah. All health care.

Julie W. McKee:
... levels of service.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Yes. All manner of health care. But it was also a great experience, and lots of different things to do. And at that point, I was going in front of the legislature and all sorts of exciting things.

Julie W. McKee:
Yeah. I think it's called baptism by fire.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
I do, too. I do, too. How did you end up in dentistry?

Julie W. McKee:
It's weird. Well, you read stories about choosing your lifetime career, there are actual studies that say that most kids, in general, choose their life career by the time they're in the eighth grade. And it's not, "Oh, I think I want to be the Public Health Dentist." It's not that, but it's, "Oh, I really like making people feel better." You might want to go into nursing. "I like working with how bodies work." You may want to be a physician. "I like tearing things apart." You may want to be an engineer. But no, me, I knew by the eighth grade I wanted to be a dentist.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Wow.

Julie W. McKee:
That's what I wanted to do. And never, ever wavered from that. Now, when I was in the third grade, I wanted to be a socialite. That's what I wanted to do. And it just wasn't going to work out.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
It doesn't pay as well under most circumstances.

Julie W. McKee:
Yes.
Secretary Eric Friedlander:
So, where were you in the eighth grade? How did you have that epiphany?

Julie W. McKee:
Well, I don't think it was an epiphany. I think it was just a seeping in of that, because I knew I liked health care, and I was fascinated by what dentist did. And the dentist I had during my childhood would let me come hang out and see how things were doing. And I played in the laboratories and look at extracted teeth, and tried to figure out what I was looking at on an x-ray and things like that. So there was a lot of support that way from that community.

Julie W. McKee:
And I never wavered from it. I that's what I knew I wanted to do. And in retrospect, what I didn't realize is, I am a person that likes immediate gratification and dentistry will give you that. "Oh, look how pretty that filling is. Look at that tooth I took out." It's not like investing, that you have to wait by quarters and lifetimes to see an outcome, but it's immediate gratification. And I didn't mind the blood and guts of it at all.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
But we talk about how important it is to have somebody who's interested in a child, and can support them and mentor them. It sounds like you had a great mentor.

Julie W. McKee:
I did. I had several. I had several. We had a social friend that was a dentist. And then we had our dentist, dentist that I visited all the time. In fact, we shared the same last name, not related at all. And in fact, the only silver fillings I have in my mouth were by his ex-tern that was in dental school at the time to do that. And we're still in touch today.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Really?

Julie W. McKee:
Uh-huh. Uh-huh. In fact, I sent him an email, a tongue-in-cheek email, complaining that one of my fillings had broken after 42 years of service. What kind of work was that? He just howled laughing and just took it all in stride.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Oh, that's wonderful. That's wonderful. So, how did you get from immediate gratification to working in the public sector?

Julie W. McKee:
I got the public health bug when I was in Mt. xSterling, and I wanted to be the dentist on the Board of Health. So I sent in my application, and I got a call from the emeritus dentist of the
county, telling me that wasn't going to happen, that he was going to be the Board of Health Dentist until he died. And he was. And he died in his mid-nineties.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Wow.

Julie W. McKee:
And besides putting the scare factor, because I was straight out of school with that, I had the offensive factor, because he did not address me as Dr. McKee, that's who I was at the time, or Julie. His salutation was "little girl."

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Julie W. McKee:
Yep. I sort of knew about public health, and went to the Governor's Office, was in the Inspector General's Office. My husband at the time saw an ad in the paper and said, "This is for you." And it was Public Health Director of a multi-county health department. And I'm like, "What the heck? Let's just go ahead and interview for it." And an internal person was supposed to get the job and they offered me the job.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Wow. Yeah.

Julie W. McKee:
So I was a Public Health Director for 12 years. What a wonderful job. We do lots of wonderful things here in this building and in our structure, but public health happens at the sidewalk of that local Health Department each and every day. They're the ones that change the behavior. They're the ones that work directly with their community. And I'm honored to be here in the supportive role of what happens in Public Health at that local Health Department.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Remind me which one that was?

Julie W. McKee:
WEDCO.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
WEDCO. That's right. That's right. Sorry. As we roll through our years, it's like "Now, which one was that?" Okay. Very good.
Julie W. McKee:
Yeah. We're running out of RAM, Secretary.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
You knew me when I had a ponytail, right?

Julie W. McKee:
Yes. Yes. I wasn't going to say exactly that, but I can say, "Oh, I've been around long enough. I remember when the Secretary had a ponytail."

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. And a red beard.

Julie W. McKee:
Yes, that too. I wasn't say that either.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Thank you. That's very kind. But what I see also is that in your role now, you've been with the Inspector General, you've been in private practice. You've been at the local Health Department level and now you're with Public Health. Your background, it couldn't be any more perfect than it is for the role that you're in.

Julie W. McKee:
Isn't it funny how the seasons of our life culminate into... You, from being a regulation writer, health planner, to the Secretary of the Cabinet, you had to think back and be going, "What a perfect segueway I had, moving from here to Louisville, and in the Commission and then to the Mayor's Office and what have you, and then back here." But yes, in fact, I was recruited to come to this position. I'm like, "I really have a job I like a lot." And they're like, "No." And they're the ones that said, "Well, here's why we need you in this office."

Julie W. McKee:
Talking about private practice, rural Kentucky, I've never seen poverty until I moved to Mount Sterling. Mount Sterling is not a poor, poor town, but it's not rich, but poverty was incredible. And then, learning the honor of regulation and enforcement, how public health worked at the front lines. That all brought me into this role, which I think makes me weirder than the next dude in what I bring to the table. And that's not bragging, that's just fact. It's just facts. So, I can think like a Public Health Director and kind of answer their questions. I can think like a regulator when we're working on regulations. I can think like a dentist who has seen it all.
Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Right. Right. And you've really been a leader in a lot of areas, kind of the childhood oral health screening. We talk about varnishing. You really led the charge for that. Can you talk a little bit about that, particularly in children and schools?

Julie W. McKee:

Yeah. Yeah. I can. I took the torch from Dr. Jim Cecil on the march. He started it and we've just developed it. And it was a wonderful thing, and honestly, not because of me, because of Dr. Cecil, our varnish program is the benchmark for many, many other public health agencies in the country to say, "Oh, you mean nurses doing varnish?" "Mm-hmm. And here's how they do it." And they're like, "That makes all the sense on the world." They use our curriculum. Our curriculum is used to teach physicians how to apply varnish to their patients in their private practice. So we've gone crazy with that.

Julie W. McKee:

One of the first legislative things I got to do was work with the Education Cabinet on screening. Representative Burch, Tom Burch, was very, very big on oral health and children's oral health and vulnerable children's oral health. And so, he wanted this in place to get kids ready for school. And ideally, the utopia was that they had an exam by a dentist and the dentist did all the work so they would go to school cavity-free and pain-free.

Julie W. McKee:

Well, it wasn't quite like that, but we have made great headway, that every child that goes into a public school program has to have an oral screening. It doesn't have to be done by a dentist. It can be done by the hygienist. It can be done by a physician. It can be done by a nurse who has had the training to do that. So all of that makes the oral health status of that child aware of it.

Julie W. McKee:

I sit on an advisory council of my home county's preschool program, and they just don't check the box, they take the list of kids that need help, get them care, so by the time that their third or fourth week of school happens, they're ready to go. Teeth are taken care of, they're all clean, ones that need help have been helped. And it's a really good thing. Oral health status, depending on the study you read, is either one of the top three or one of the top five readiness factors of a child going to school.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Of course. And we've made some strides in vision, and we've made some strides in hearing. But you can't learn if your tooth hurts. You're not going to be able to take in some of the nutrition that's available at schools, right, which has a lot to do with development, if there's something wrong with your teeth, your gums. It's not possible.
Julie W. McKee:
It is not possible. And that's such a good point to bring up, because children who have active decay and decay that hurts, or other decay that makes it so they can't eat, they are forced to choose more processed foods. They can't eat the apple, they have to go for the apple sauce. They can't eat the pork chop, they've got to go for the baloney. So you can see the difference in the less processed, which are healthy for all of us, but especially our growing kids.

Julie W. McKee:
But one of the reasons I like talking about this on this podcast is that it's time for parents of kids going into school, public school, to check with their dentist, check with their physician, check with their health department. Every health department has a nurse that's qualified to do this. It doesn't cost anything and they can get it done. It's not huge, but it's a beginning. There are private schools and parochial schools in the state of Kentucky that have the same requirement. It's not a state law, but it's one of their policies for their children, too.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Because it's the right thing to do.

Julie W. McKee:
Bingo.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Yeah. Yeah. And that follows us all through as we age, right?

Julie W. McKee:
Yes.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Good oral health is so important, because that's all now being tied to heart conditions, and that constant inflammation to so many other conditions. And so, being able to go in and take care of your teeth, your gums, it's absolutely critical for your overall health.

Julie W. McKee:
It really is. And one of our mantras in my program is, "Oral health and all health." And then the joke mantra is, "World peace through oral health." Because we think we can do it. But yes, and more and more, we realize that throughout the lifespan, it makes a difference. You were talking about cardiovascular disease. We know exactly how that happens in our systemic health. So we work, dentists, are working more and more every day with cardiologists, direct with cardiologists, to make sure that the oral condition doesn't impact their cardiovascular disease.
Julie W. McKee:
We dentists work with surgery patients. You have to have a dental clearance before you can have a knee replacement. Thank goodness. And we understand why taking care of your mouth during your prenatal months has a whole spectrum of benefits, and one of them is that you have a healthier baby. You have a fuller term baby, and that's what we want. You have a healthier baby. And when you have a healthier baby, since many of our deliveries are paid for by the tax dollars, that we reduce the tax burden on that by just keeping clean teeth in prenatal patients.

Julie W. McKee:
But what we found out is that women who learn about oral health during their pregnancy, especially with their first pregnancy, they keep it up. We've checked them years down the road, and they're just militant about it. But the benefit from that is lower dental costs for them, but surprisingly, lower decay rates of their offspring.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
I'll bet.

Julie W. McKee:
And the later onset of that first cavity. It doesn't happen at 3.5, it might happen at six.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Well, that sense.

Julie W. McKee:
It saves money.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Yes, it does. But you were talking about in health care, cardiologists, surgeons, we just had a little, still having, going through this little worldwide pandemic. And the procedures changed, and you were right on the ground with, "How do we come up with procedures now during COVID?" That had to completely impact what you were doing.

Julie W. McKee:
It obsessed what I was doing, actually. We had actually an informal working group that we literally started the 20th of March.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Wow.
Julie W. McKee:
Yeah. "It's coming. We need to think about what's going on." We had no idea we were going to be experiencing a health care shutdown. So the executive order came down that made it so that health care professionals were asked to close except for emergency situations.

Julie W. McKee:
So we went to work immediately trying to get a plan going. And we got people from not only dentists, but the world of hygiene, the world of dental schools, oral health coalitions, the FQHCs that have dentistry, all came together and came up with a plan. And we thought we kind of had it in gear, and then all of a sudden to our surprise, we hear during one of the wonderful press conferences, that dentistry was going to open on Monday. We're like, "What? What? Huh?" So we got our plan a little bit more jelled, and submitted it to Dr. Stack on Saturday. He approved it on Sunday, and the dentists were ready to go on Monday. It was stressful. It was exciting, it really was, to know that dentists could be a big part of the control of the disease.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Right.

Julie W. McKee:
To this day, now they may be keeping numbers from me, but to this day, I am unaware of COVID being transmitted vertically in a dental practice, that a provider, a hygienist or a direct assistant or a dentist, has not given a patient COVID.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Right.

Julie W. McKee:
They have not caught COVID from a patient. Now, they like to give it to each other, because they all go to lunch together. So that says a lot. Now, in retrospect, dentists needed to be paying attention to aerosol mitigation anyway. They should have been doing it long ago. We just said, "Oh, we have universal precautions. We're good." And it wasn't enough. So we should have been doing this anyway, we as an industry. So that's the good part of it.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Yeah.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
And the other thing is that you pulled together a group of experts. And we did that in a lot of areas, and folks were so willing to work together. And even some entities that perhaps weren't as willing in the past, but we as a state and we as a Cabinet and as provider groups, I think we pulled together kind of differently. Did you have that experience?
Julie W. McKee:
Yes.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
And a lot of the, I guess, guardrails were down, but a lot of the urgency was there. I've said before, the words nimble and CHFS were never used in the same sentence as far as I knew. But we really became nimble.

Julie W. McKee:
Yes. I'm ready to do it again, but if it's a few more years, that'd be fine, too.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Yeah. Oh yes, please.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
And it's something I talk about. It's always kind of hard to hear, but there's some blessings of COVID, and the way that we learned to work together, maybe even at the speed that we worked together, we know we can do that. Right?

Julie W. McKee:
Yep. I think it's was a wonderful study in humanity, that we did come together, that we let go some of our shields and our halos, and worked with each other to make sure that everybody was as safe as they could be, without having a whole lot of information.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Right.

Julie W. McKee:
This was so strange. That's why they called it a novel coronavirus.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Which we all got to learn together, which again is another thing that doesn't always happen in government, where, "Ooh, that didn't work. Okay. Let's try something else." But we really were able to do that.

Julie W. McKee:
Yep. It was a tragedy. The whole pandemic was a tragedy.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Yeah, absolutely.
Julie W. McKee:
But there was that sliver of silver lining that got dentists together, and dentists became better dentists.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Right. Right. Which is amazing. So besides all that, what exciting things are you working on now?

Julie W. McKee:
Oh, I've got a few things going on. The thing that we are really excited about is, and talk about a nerd, I'm so excited about doing a survey. We are doing surveillance on the very young Kentuckians, those kids under six years old. We have special permission from the Commissioner to do this, and we are going in and doing oral look-ins, look in the mouth, see what's going on with the kids, across the state, just not along I-75 or I-64 or whatever. But we have plans to go into every county.

Julie W. McKee:
When we did our Strategic Plan a few years ago, one of the things that surprised me is, yeah, the Department of Education wants data, and I want data and you want data. And the dental schools want data. But it surprised me that the intensity of desire of the private practitioner, "I want data. I want to know what's going on in my community." And so, that was one of the drivers that we're going to get kids in all 120 counties, their mouths looked into. Now, not all kids, but as many as we possibly can.

Julie W. McKee:
One of the things that we're doing that's not unique, we're using a national, in fact, it's an international survey tool so that we can compare our outcomes with other states and territories. The unique thing about ours is, ours is, except for me, it is 100% dental hygienist-driven. Then we have regional dental hygienist managers, the dental hygienists are the ones that are going to look in the mouth and get this done. So I'm very excited about that.

Julie W. McKee:
It's going to take about a year, because we have to build capacity. We have to get permissions to go into the Head Starts and the daycares, but we've been trying to do this for many, many years. The last time this was done in a significant way, was in 1999 and published in 2001.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Wow.

Julie W. McKee:
So that means that the children that we looked in their mouths in 1999, we're looking in their kids' mouths this year.
Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Right.

Julie W. McKee:
Yeah. So it's about time. So I'm really excited about that. Other things that we're working on is we are working to help our smaller water plants, because we have a statewide fluoridation mandate by law. Not all states have that, but we do, thank goodness. And we are working with the mid to smaller water plants to give them grants to buy new fluoridation equipment. That will guarantee that our water will be optimally fluoridated for years to come. And that's one thing we can do. One of the things that I say about our statewide mandate is our decay rate, especially in our children, is a statewide problem, and we need a statewide solution to do that.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Right.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Good. So we've talked about some, some exciting projects and we've talked about COVID and how busy you were during that. How did you take care of yourself then? And how do you do self-care outside of this place, outside of work?

Julie W. McKee:
Outside of work? Is there something outside of work? Yes, there is.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Yes, there is.

Julie W. McKee:
I'm just teasing. Yes. Well, during COVID, like I said, our seasons come to us for good reason. In COVID, the big thing for me to do was take care of my dad. My dad was very, very old. He ended up passing away during COVID, but I was honored to take care of him. He was a social butterfly. He had to go be with people. And so, being widowed himself, he was at home, and I'm like, "You need to come be with us." And so, I took him into my house, and we had some great times and we tried to socialize as much as we could. But being with him was really good.

Julie W. McKee:
Outside that, I am a militant knitter. I love to knit. And if I'm sitting, I'm knitting. And also, I am trying my hand and miserably failing at vegetable gardening, miserably failing. I did it last year, I had a whole row of peas, I got three pods out of the whole row. I had six or seven plants of peppers, and I got four peppers and they were about an inch tall. I had a watermelon that was three inches in diameter. I'm good at this.
Secretary Eric Friedlander:
I'm doing some of that, too, and can probably match most of your miserable failures, but it doesn't matter. I still enjoy it, and I fight off the rabbits and they win. They win.

Julie W. McKee:
Yeah. They have to eat, too.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
But okay, then I'm sharing with wildlife. Great. But that's therapeutic, right?

Julie W. McKee:
It is so therapeutic, and there is something very peaceful about getting those weeds out. And I don't know if it's every weed has a name that I'm just ripping it out of the ground, or feel like I'm caring for the plants, being a little mommy to the plants. But I never not enjoy it. I may not harvest as much as the other people do, but I enjoy it as much as if I did.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Yeah. Going back to your immediate gratification, right?

Julie W. McKee:
Yes.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
When you pull a weed, it is pulled. "I got you."

Julie W. McKee:
Yeah. Until next Saturday.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
When you can get immediate gratification again.

Julie W. McKee:
That's right. That's right.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Well, thank you. I have enjoyed our conversation. I have enjoyed kind of the way our careers have kind of woven around-

Julie W. McKee:
Intersected and tangentd.
Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Knitted together, there we go. That's the one I wanted. And thank you for your service. You have given a career, as I have, so I understand, to public service. And that is so very important, and it's not necessarily highly valued, but it's what we all do in the Cabinet. And it is vital. It's critical. And so thank you.

Julie W. McKee:
It is critical. And we all have bad days, but overall, it's incredibly rewarding and satisfying.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Mm-hmm. It is.

Julie W. McKee:
And look at the people who have jobs that can't say that.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Right. Right. I like to say, any of us in the Cabinet, you in particular, you wake up every day and it's, "I can change a person's life. I can change a community's life. I can change a state." How amazing, how amazing.

Julie W. McKee:
It is amazing.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
And we did it during COVID, and we saved lives. And I know we saved lives, so that is something we'll always be able to have with us. Right?

Julie W. McKee:
Yes. And public service is an honor, and I highly recommend it to most people.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Me, too. Me, too. Well, thank you for talking with me today, and I hope the folks who listen here have enjoyed it and will join us for our next podcast. Thank you.

Julie W. McKee:
You're welcome.

Julianne Hatton:
Thanks for joining us on CHFS Community, hosted by Secretary Eric Friedlander, produced by Julianne Hatton. Our Assistant Producer is Beth Fisher. Our Technical Director and Graphic Artist is Lisa Wallace. Watch for the podcast preview in your email, so you'll never miss an
episode. While you're at it, tell your coworkers about the show. Until next time, stay healthy, Kentucky.