

EP.61 - Lisa Johnson FINAL

Narrator: You're listening to *BioTalk* with Rich Bendis, the only podcast focused on the BioHealth Capital Region. Each episode, we'll talk to leaders in the industry to break down the biggest topics happening today in BioHealth.

Rich Bendis: Hi, this is Rich Bendis. I'm your host of *BioTalk*, and we're actually going to be interviewing one of our peer organizations in the Midwest today, which is something that BioTalk hasn't ventured into too much, but we're going to start doing more with other bio, life science, and BioHealth organizations around the United States and the world. And we have a guinea pig from Wisconsin who's going to be our first peer organization. We have Lisa Johnson, who is the CEO of BioForward located in Madison, I think, Lisa, correct?

Lisa Johnson: That's correct.

Rich Bendis: So, Lisa, welcome to *BioTalk*.

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Lisa Johnson: Thank you. Thank you for having me, Rich, I appreciate it. And I like being a guinea pig. I'm all for being a guinea pig.

Rich Bendis: We're going to see what happens with this and which direction it goes, but I know it's going to go great. But really, in order to get this started, I think it would be good to introduce the listeners to you personally and then we'll go into the organization after that, but let's talk a little bit about Lisa Johnson. How did you end up getting into this world of economic development and bio-related organizations? So Lisa, talk a little bit about your background.

Lisa Johnson: Well, I come at it not from a science perspective. I come from a finance background. I had an opportunity to join three scientists and start a company called Novagen back in 1989. It was a life science reagents company. We built that company and we were purchased by Merck KGaA in 1998 and that was a great experience for me and also our company allowing to be a part of a larger organization that really opened up a lot of global markets for our reagents.

0:01:59 Our company was focused on protein purification. We also had a protein expression line of products that we were very well-known for. So anyway,

as I took on different roles then with Merck—and also previously with Novagen—you know, you do anything when you start a company. I did dishes, I shipped products, I took customer orders. The great thing about that is you appreciate all jobs in a company. So after Merck bought us, I then took on a variety of business development, operational roles. I was general manager of both Novagen and Calbiochem, which is a very large biochemicals company. We had 15,000 products. I was with Merck through 2008. I joined another small biotech company and instrumentation company called Semba Biosciences for a few years, raised equity during the worst time ever in 2008, 2009. But again, it's good to go through those experiences and challenges. And then I went into what you were referring to, the economic development world, and I joined the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation as VP of Entrepreneurship and Innovation for the state.

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Was with them for three and a half years, and since 2015, I've now been leading BioForward as CEO. And it's just—I really bring a really good background, not only certainly in the finance business development raising equity, entrepreneurial background, but then also I gained that government experience and I'm just well-connected with all the firms. Again, it is Madison, it is Wisconsin. It's not California, it's not Massachusetts. We know everyone. We're well-connected. We support each other. So it was really a good position for me, even though I've had no non-profit experience, just to join in and help lead an organization that—what we call, and thank you Rich—is for leading the BioHealth industry in the state of Wisconsin.

Rich Bendis:

Great. Thanks for adopting BioHealth is a nice term for Wisconsin, right?

Lisa Johnson:

That's right.

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Rich Bendis:

Interesting and diverse background. And before I go into BioForward, was all of this experience in Wisconsin or were you in different parts of the United States with Merck and Novagen?

Lisa Johnson:

I was based out of Madison, although once a month I would be in San Diego to be at the Calbiochem operations that was based out of San

Diego. And because I was with Merck, I did a lot of the operations, international business development, so I'd say I was travelling 40, 50% of my time. So spent a lot of time in Europe, a lot of time in Asia doing a lot of our OEM [sp] contract. And I think we had 200 licensing agreements because as you know, in the reagents business, everything is licensed in. You could have one product with 10 licenses associated with it. So I was all over the world meeting with people, which was a great experience.

Rich Bendis: But you always came back home, huh?

Lisa Johnson: I always came back home. They couldn't get me outta Wisconsin. I love this place.

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Rich Bendis: Great. So let's talk about this transition. You made somewhat of a transition when you went to the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation, that sort of gets you into the government role. But that—really the economic development introduction really because that's what their primary role is. And then talk about BioForward and the transition from WEDC to BioForward and a little history of BioForward.

Lisa Johnson: Sure. Yeah, that transition—it was a really good transition. Like I said, it was really beneficial for me to go into WDC and learn government. Again, I came out of private industry, and I think it was not only an education experience for me; I also think I brought a lot to WDC coming out of private industry. I think a lot of people have only had government. I think they need to also listen to those of us who have been in private industry and how our government can work differently, react differently. And so, for me to gain that experience though on the advocacy side, how to work with legislators, it was a really good transition then to go to BioForward which, as you know, with a lot of these associations, a good part of our work—the value we bring our members—is our advocacy work.

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And so I had already made contacts within the legislature, the governor's office. Just, again, having those connections was really very helpful to me. Going into the history of BioForward, BioForward actually has been around since 1988. A long time—I think it was called Wisconsin Medical Device and Manufacturing. They always go through these name changes. It was in 2009, I believe, they changed the name to BioForward trying to have a more modern name and it all goes around Wisconsin has this

motto about forward. And so it was just trying to bring in “bio” and then this term “forward” that gets associated with Wisconsin. It was probably like a lot of associations where very—again, advocacy-oriented and very event-oriented. When I came in in 2015—and again, a lot of associations go through this—it just was having, I think, kind of an identity crisis and where was it going?

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It was very Madison-focused. We had a big presence in Milwaukee. A lot of firms and outstanding research institutions are also in the Milwaukee area. So when I came on, I was like, “Let’s try and shake this thing up.” We went through a whole branding, a different branding, logo, new website, and really tried to say, “What else can we do that’s of value to our organization rather than just doing events all the time?” So we really kind of—we changed and we took up your term, Rich, and again, acknowledging, thank you for this term because what I was finding as I listened to my members was when you use the term biotech or life sciences, that spoke certainly to the reagents companies like mine. It spoke to some of the instrumentation, maybe our API manufacturers. But all of our medical device companies, our digital health companies, our healthcare systems went, “I’m not biotech and I’m not life sciences.”

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I said, “Listen, I think the term we all should be using,”—because I have certainly been around, I had heard you, Rich—I said, “What’s more inclusive is the term BioHealth.” Then it speaks to the whole spectrum of Wisconsin’s ecosystem, which we *have* strengthened the biotech, we have strengthened certainly the reagents, diagnostics. Not so much therapeutics, just a little bit, but we do have a lot of strength in medical device and digital health. And I wanted our membership more expansive to bring in all of that as well, their healthcare systems. And then the other thing we moved away from was we also had a few agricultural companies, and certainly bio is very important to agriculture. I think it’s great. I see why some associations are very focused on that. But for us it didn’t make sense, especially in Wisconsin there’s like a hundred other associations that represent agriculture. So we pulled out of that and we didn’t feel that represented how we wanted to go forward and where the strength of our association and how we could advocate was we kept it more outside of agriculture on very much what now we call the BioHealth.

- 0:09:04 And you should be pleased, Rich—it’s so exciting to me when I read articles now in Wisconsin, or I hear a legislator go, “And our BioHealth industry is driving this economic impact.” And I’m like, it’s happening. People are embracing this term because it’s more inclusive. It works better as we go forward, especially where we’re so data-driven. It makes more sense.
- Rich Bendis:** You don’t have to pay anything for that. There’s no royalty or licensing on that, right?
- Lisa Johnson:** Thank you.
- Rich Bendis:** It’s nice to have a surrogate in the Midwest, right?
- Lisa Johnson:** That’s right. Exactly.
- Rich Bendis:** So anyway, you pivoted, you changed, you’re more focused in the BioHealth industry right now. You are a trade association. I guess that’s what—you are 501c6?
- Lisa Johnson:** C6. That is correct.
- Rich Bendis:** Which you can do your advocacy work, whereas the c3s, which I’m a c3, I have to do education. I can’t do advocacy.
- 0:10:01 So it’s just different terminology for doing the same thing. In addition to being a traditional trade association, tell me a little bit about what some of the programs are and activities you have. What are the primary goals of BioForward?
- Lisa Johnson:** As we went through all this branding, I really have been fortunate to have some really great board members and I thank—again, I think they respected me coming out of private industry that I could talk their talk and understand what they were going through. And the main thing they kept saying to me was, “Lisa, help us grow our companies. Help us grow our companies.” I said, “Okay. How are we gonna grow your companies?” And they said, “The main thing we need is talent. We need talent in the state of Wisconsin. We need to start doing something.” And they knew, okay, BioForward can’t flip a switch and go, “Voila, we got a whole bunch of talent.” Let’s be initiative-oriented then and let’s try and bring value to our members in the ways they think this will help them grow their companies.

- 0:10:59 So what we did is we really backed off of taking all of our labor, time, efforts putting on events. We have one big summit and we have an annual member meeting and maybe a couple parties here. That's it. Gone. That wasn't bringing them value. So we invested in a national talent initiative through social media. We've been doing it for over a year. We invested in landing pages. We're paying for website landing pages for all of our companies. We've now hired a PR firm to connect with national media, even more local media, just again, to educate even our state on what's happening. You never know where talent is gonna come from. So we've started trying to do definitely more initiatives. We've also invested—we helped set up an organization called Women in BioHealth. We have it run all through BioForward. But again, trying to support women in this industry with education, connections, just trying to do more to uplift women in the scientific community, and have a voice out there that women need to have more prominent roles, whether it's on boards or executive positions within our companies.
- 0:12:11 We also have invested—we are also trying to give more of a national focus onto Wisconsin and the strength of our biomanufacturing, so we also have been marketing that we are a national hub for biomanufacturing. This came out of the University of Wisconsin Madison, again, one of our top research institutions in the world, which often times—and again, Rich, I think your Kansas background—you know what it's like in the Midwest. We don't like to talk about things. Everyone should just know what we do in the Midwest. Well, we aren't good about saying, "Let's start marketing to the world what we are good at." We have to start bragging because we aren't where the big media markets are. We aren't on the coast. So we've gotta start being more vocal. So we're trying to back these initiatives and this hub for biomanufacturing is trying to connect the university, startups and then with BioForward marketing, trying to get greater focus and partnerships, collaborations happening in the state.
- 0:13:08 So kind of a long-winded way to answer your question, but again, I think besides advocacy—which we have to maintain that. That's a value that we do bring our members. We won't go away from that. But we've really shifted that also to these initiatives and backed off of events and just things like that that just take too much time and our companies said, "That doesn't bring me value. Do something that brings me value."

Rich Bendis: Yeah. In order for ecosystems to work, as you know, you really need to have all of the elements working together. So you gotta have your local government working together, your state government, academia, industry, non-governmental organizations. Talk a little bit about those different dimensions that you're working with in Wisconsin and which ones are really leading this world, which ones are you dragging into it, which ones do you have to get more engaged with in order for this to be fully functional.

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Lisa Johnson: I do think that's something we can improve upon here. And you would think—again, I started off with we're a smaller state, and we kinda know one another. But I think there are times we have struggled with having really strong collaborations between academia and industry. It certainly has been there. We have WARF, a licensing powerhouse for the University of Wisconsin Madison. So those kinds of collaborations have happened on the licensing front, but we can do more. And so I think there is this weakness—and that's where BioForward has to continue to do a better job helping make those connections. And again, as bad as COVID has been, I will tell you that the awesome thing that has happened from COVID is we have seen incredible collaborations. And I know you're seeing it everywhere.

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I think all of us should be proud nationally that these collaborations are happening, but we've had many that have happened between our research institutions, our industry, whether it's on the PPE front, the testing front. I've seen it much more. And so I think it's kind of been an awakening for us, and so even at our summit this year, we're having a panel discussion on, how did this happen? How do we keep this going forward? This shouldn't just be during a crisis we have collaborations. And yeah, we have these quick products through COVID. How do we sustain this going forward? So then you have our government, and certainly WDC has been involved. They've done some really great things on some investments for small businesses, also spring [sp] BioForward like on economic impact studies, but I still think the state can continue to do more and to understand that industries like this BioHealth industry is the future of this state. And you have to be able to also market this in a

way from a state level and to understand investments that it's gonna take to really get our young companies up and going.

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They've made some investments in our hub for biomanufacturing, but some other states—when we do 750,000 to a million, we think that is just an enormous sum of money—where other states are gonna pour millions into this industry because they understand one, multiplier effect. Two, your salaries are much, much higher. The supply chain effect is huge in this state, especially with our medical device industry. So those connecting points as you say, I think we all have to take harder looks at ourselves within this state on doing a better job and it also starts with BioForward, that I know we can continue to improve to bring industry and academia together because really, with the strength of our research institutions, especially UW Madison, there should be more. We should have more younger companies starting. We should have more investments. So we, as BioForward, definitely have to continue to market a lot of these technologies, these young companies better on a national level, than what we've done in the past.

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Rich Bendis:

Yeah. And generally, in a lot of ecosystems, Lisa—and you know this—I'm talking to Lisa Johnson who's the CEO of BioForward in Wisconsin about their ecosystem. Generally, it's all dependent on leadership. When I came in to Maryland back almost nine years now, there wasn't a great deal of collaboration. Basically it was government and academic-driven. Industry was a recipient of everything that was done through academia and government, but they were not actual, active participants. What really turned the tide there was getting AstraZeneca, which was the 800-pound gorilla with 5,000 employees in the backyard saying, "We need to build a stronger ecosystem because we need more employees," as you're talking about. "We need to strengthen our pipeline, we wanna look at M and A, we wanna attract people, we wanna have great quality of life." But really, the pivotal thing was when AstraZeneca and MedImmune at that time said, "We really need to build this ecosystem."

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So in other states I've been associated with, sometimes it's a governor. Sometimes it's a president of the university. Sometimes it's a CEO. Sometimes it's a non-profit organization like a Kauffman Foundation in Kansas City. So I guess the key is—in this buildup to the question—who is

really providing the drive and the leadership around BioForward and the BioHealth industry to create greater awareness and more collaboration within Wisconsin?

Lisa Johnson: Well, I think there is industry involvement. That is an excellent point, Rich. And it certainly is not the government that's driving it. It's definitely not. It is absolutely not the government driving it. And that's okay. I mean, I think those are unusual. Because a government can do that—I still think it wouldn't be as powerful as what you had described where is it coming out of the university or coming out of a major industry player? I absolutely think those are better ways to build an ecosystem.

0:18:58 We have very good leaders, whether it's Medical College of Wisconsin, the UW Madison, especially the School of Public Health. Excellent leaders. And we certainly, within our board, whether it's companies like GE Healthcare, PPD, Catalent, Covance, I mean I can go on and on. We have many strong companies. They aren't the size of AstraZeneca. Although GE Healthcare certainly is. I mean, GE Healthcare certainly is a powerful industry. What I've seen is certainly the industry has been telling us, "We want to do more in collaboration." As I really think about it, where I feel like it's being driven is a little bit more coming out of the university, and I'm gonna use that hub for biomanufacturing is that there is a gentleman, Dr. Bill Murphy, who's the one that really said we could do more if we start to drive this with collaboration and start to bring in industry within our institute at the university.

0:19:58 How do we take these technologies out? How do we get people working together? So he really has that vision and that's where we've been trying to hook in. So I can't say right now what you had described, we don't have that one person, two people that are really saying, "That's it. We're moving. We're gonna do it." I think it's many little parties right now and that's why I think we're taking less to heart—continually to have a hard look at BioForward, can we continue to play that role? You hear my voice, I'm a passionate person. I try and bring that energy. And so I just—again, some of this is just a Midwest attitude, right? You put your head down and you focus on your company and you drive sales and profit. I knew it, that's how I operated. I did not operate in the community, I did not collaborate with others. I looked for my licenses and I could care less

about anyone else. It's trying to break that mold in the Midwest and to think differently.

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And I think for those of us who have had all this international experience, you start to see how it works. So it's bringing that back and it's just gonna continue to kind of hit at people and prove to them these collaborations can work, and we just have to continue to work together to do more with it to uplift this. But I do think we're on the right path on some of the things we're doing, being initiative while—we're not trying to do things the old way. Again, "Ah, let's just do our advocacy. Let's just do our events, it's easy. Whatever." At least our board members, and a lot of these important companies that are really driving the BioHealth industry in Wisconsin are going, "That's it. We've gotta change. We gotta get talent here. We have to do more." So, I think we're doing the right things. It's just not quite what you were able to accomplish right away, but I think we're starting to go down a really good path.

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Rich Bendis:

Yeah. It's not right away, Lisa. It sounds like it's right away, but you're an overnight success over 10 years or 20 years basically. But I hear the passion in your voice and I know that you're providing great leadership, but there's two other Ps other than passion, and it's really—if you're gonna try to build this ecosystem—it's the persistence and the patience. Because if you come from industry, sometimes you don't have the patience because you can get decisions made more quickly. When you're an influencer—or I say we're an innovation intermediary—we really don't control everything, but we really have to get people on the same page in order to make that difference happen. I think you're in the right spot to be in that intermediary role with BioForward to make that happen, but it does take a little patience.

Lisa Johnson:

It does, and that's what I'm not good at, Rich, so that was good advice. Thank you. I need that. [Laughs]

Rich Bendis:

I can see that you'd like it to happen overnight, and when you're trying to pivot a whole state and a whole industry and get all of the constituents to work together, sometimes it takes a few decades. But anyway, let's talk a little bit about the industry strengths.

0:22:58 All of a sudden the vaccine—our region has become one of the global vaccine hotspots in the world right now with everything that's going on with AstraZeneca and Emergent and QIAGEN and GSK and Novavax and da, da, da, da. We're very fortunate to have them there. But let's talk about the industry sector strengths you have in Wisconsin. Where would you say you have some leadership or differential advantages to where you can create some national and global presence based on the strengths of what you have in your backyard?

Lisa Johnson: So I think there's a few areas. I think we'll always have some strength in the life science tools area. As you know, a lot of that business has consolidated. When I had Novagen, there were hundreds of reagents companies. Everything's getting more and more consolidated. I used to work with QIAGEN all the time. So certainly there's still that. We have Promega here. We have Aldevron. We do have some really nice reagent companies. So there's a strength. There's just an ongoing strength. I mean Promega's—as you were talking about the vaccine, they're one of the top reagent suppliers for the testing kits in the world.

0:24:00 I mean hundreds of millions of kits they have put their reagents into. We certainly have strength in diagnostics in the sense that we just have a huge player here Exact Sciences. That's just a credit to the CEO, Kevin Conroy. Actually, that technology came out of the East Coast, but he kept it here. He's built the talent here. He's given back to the community and really bringing in the diversity into that company. So there's a strength, even though it's—I'm talking one company; you're talking about multiple vaccine companies. Nevertheless, that gives you a foundation and he's buying other companies. Those are the things, as you know—I've watched it with Promega back in the 80s, early 90s. What happened was you had many people leave Promega, start their own companies. And so that had a boom in Wisconsin, to have this whole reagents and instrumentation companies coming out. Exact Sciences is buying companies now and there have been people leaving, starting their own companies, but still, once you have that huge presence, you know that spawns others in that area.

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companies in the world, 10,000 employees in Madison. Not that this is some incredibly—no, it was electronic medical records—nevertheless, her impact—and that’s awesome that that’s a woman CEO that started this company and has built this company—is that you’ve had many people leave that company start their own companies. They built that in Madison. And so, we definitely have this kind of—from this research tools beginning to this digital health. And certainly our healthcare system, we have very strong healthcare in the sense of UW Health, Advocate Aurora. You have a lot of the strength in healthcare certainly going on, and then with our research institutions. UW Madison, which I had already mentioned, it is one of the top research institutions in the world. It is.

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You have Michigan, you have Wisconsin, and then you have Washington. Those are your three major, public university research institutions. And we’re very fortunate, because from that, you have the talent, you have the companies that are coming outta there. Our weakness is we don’t have the investments sitting here. We don’t have the capital that sits in this state. But I would say, to me, those are our real strengths. Again, you’re gonna have your few therapeutics. And then we certainly have our API and biologics manufacturing, so as you have the pharma out on the East Coast, they’re certainly doing a lot of manufacturing, whether it’s at Catalent, we have Alchemy, you have your testing organizations, PPD, Covance, so you have a lot of those kind of API biologics manufacturers because the talent—they can get the chemistry. You have a lot of chemistry majors coming out and coming. So I think there’s areas, and I think maybe what you’re gonna—you gotta have your focuses, right? You can’t be everything. It’s not possible, especially in the Midwest.

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But we definitely have some strengths and I think digital health and everything that now you’re starting to see, everything’s data-oriented anyway, so it’s med tech now, not medical device, so I think we have some of that in Wisconsin.

Rich Bendis:

I think you have a lot of the ingredients that are necessary and you do have key players in each of those different sectors you mentioned, which are important. And I call it the Hybritech effect. If you look at what happened with Hybritech and a hundred companies spun out of Hybritech in San Diego, we’re all looking for that to happen, but that just doesn’t happen overnight. We’re starting to see some of that from

Medlummune and Human Genome Sciences, and that's happened in the last three or four years, but they've been around 20 years. And those things will eventually occur, but we can't expect and we can't have all of the other people expect that you're gonna create the next Medlummune tomorrow because that takes many billion dollars and many years to get there. So but all of these smaller companies in the BioHealth sector that you've rephrased it as, there's a lot of singles and doubles and triples there that are really important to build the ecosystem.

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Lisa Johnson: That's correct. Yeah.

Rich Bendis: You're talking about one of the challenges we have, the capital. We have been a flyover in a drive through region just like the Midwest has been and Wisconsin, Kansas, where I still have a home. So what do you see are the challenges within the capital area and what are you trying to do to address—it's really more the early stage capital needs. And we look at it as the innovation capital [0:28:30] half a million to five million dollars. If you can get through that gap, you can really get to the bigger players. So I would imagine Wisconsin's similar to what we have in our own backyard.

Lisa Johnson: Yeah, you're absolutely right. I think the state has done a really good job on the angel side. We got the angel tax credits, technology development loan. There's a lot of support on the very earliest. But you're right, it's that 500 and—I'd say and above. Yeah, your two, five million dollar raises and above.

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We do have some entities that have started here that have really had to educate a lot of the people in this state, especially our government, when they are starting to get more into some of the venture funding and their point is we aren't going to invest in all Wisconsin companies. We're going to invest maybe in an Ohio company. We might invest in a Massachusetts company. But when we do that, we can then start to bring in syndication back into Wisconsin. Where you only think you're gonna stay in this state and you don't invest anywhere else, you can't bring in other capital groups. It's not how it works. It's always syndication to bring in some of those bigger dollars. So again, there's this learning curve in Wisconsin, and I think overall in the Midwest, that this is how it's played, folks. Because we aren't California, where it's all this money and they don't

need anybody else. Okay, that's gonna be different. Here, we gotta have syndication to bring in some of those bigger dollars and to be able to market that and we're just gonna need some more of those firms that can do some of that.

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Again, we've had some really great angel investors. There's a lot of wealthy people everywhere, right? There's a lot of wealthy people that have done those kinds of investments, set up their own LLCs, invest in our companies, but when you get to that five, ten more, that's where it starts to get tough and we need some more of those firms. And BioForward hasn't done as much in that area. We really haven't. That hasn't been the focus so far. It's just more that from my background, being involved in equity raises in that WDC that I see and I certainly talk to those groups because certainly our young companies in our space are needing financing. So whenever we can help 'em, we're trying to help them. This a problem, but on one other flipside, I would say some of our companies also are not very good at understanding how to get out of the walls of Wisconsin to look for financing. That's why I brought up Kevin Conroy with Exact Sciences. He had to do that. That company grew very quickly, but he knew how to go to the coasts and get money.

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And he said, "You can't just sit in Wisconsin and think you can tell your story. It doesn't work that way. You gotta get out." So, it's an education for our entrepreneurs, our investors. Again, it's this being patient, right, Rich? Dragging them along. This is just how it works [Laughs] We'll get there.

Rich Bendis:

I understand the patience part, but I can see a program extension coming down the road for BioForward around the capital side.

Lisa Johnson:

Yeah, I agree.

Rich Bendis:

So probably the ecosystem can do a lot with talent, do a lot with technology and all the great assets, but if the people around the United States and the world don't know the quality of the assets you have, then you're never gonna be able to attract their capital. Those success stories you have that are getting outside of Wisconsin are spreading that word for you and doing a good job, like Exact Sciences. You mentioned COVID earlier. So let's talk a little bit about what the pandemic and COVID-19

has done to your industry, to your state, and what are you seeing happening right now that's good, bad around the pandemic?

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Lisa Johnson:

Certainly with our industry, certainly—fortunately, like most states, it was essential businesses. You couldn't shut down Promega; you would have shut down the global testing market. So I think what we've seen—overall our industry has done very well—at least just for our industry—has done very well because they've certainly had product lines that have gone in the tank like everybody, where their products for research at universities was non-existent. But again, they pivoted. Our instrumentation companies, our reagent companies all pivoted to COVID and they're booming. They're working 24/7. All the manufacturers I talked about, API and biologic, they are at capacity and beyond because they're starting to manufacture all these vaccines and therapeutics even if they haven't gone through all the clinical trials, as we know. So we're at capacity. Medical device, if you talk to GE Healthcare, certain segments, maybe mammograms, those weren't being done for months.

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But then there are whole other ventilators and other imaging equipment has exploded. So we've really seen our industry be fine, but in different ways. We talked about collaborations. Collaborations happened that hadn't happened. Those were all positives. I think as you talk to these companies, it's still like everybody—and certainly we're going through it—it's just the adjustment of people being at home. Can we be as efficient? Are we getting the things done that we need to get done because you have all these distractions for a lot of us who have not worked from home. So I think it's more of that. Another great thing that I saw right away outta the gates with our companies was, you know a lot of these large companies had protocols ready to go. Maybe it didn't specifically say pandemic, but they were ready to put in the safety procedures and it was literally—I think it was one week after the governor announced safe at home orders—because all of our business were essential, they put out all their protocols, they had a Zoom conference with all our small companies saying, “Okay, here's the documents we're gonna use.”

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Instead of saying “I'm gonna keep this all confidential, I'm not gonna tell another”—we put it on our website. They were open. “Here's what you

need to do.” Because they wanted all employees in every single company safe. It didn’t matter that this was their procedure they came up with. They’re gonna get it out there to everybody. We saw that. Again, this isn’t just Wisconsin, I know, but it’s that sense of community that you respect. And I just hope we can get other people thinking that sense of community with masks or social distancing. That’s what I don’t understand. It seems like there’s so much of that where people do understand community first because we’ll get through this faster, we’ll solve this. And then there’s others that are just not community, and where does that get us? I was very proud of our industry for doing that.

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We aren’t like the coast, certainly, but we do have our vaccine company FluGen, they’re a universal flu vaccine company that pivoted to now go into a COVID vaccine. Convalescents, the therapy using the COVID plasma—here, I’ll get it out—the plasma from COVID patients. We have a big company, Versiti, which is Blood Center of Wisconsin. I mean, they have been part of that. Again, these collaborations that you’re seeing with entities, whether it’s Midwest, the coast, you’re just seeing Johns Hopkins, I know, had a huge study around convalescents plasma and UW Madison is involved in that. So I think there’s a lot of good. I’m seeing a lot of positive besides all the negatives that we’re all aware of that we don’t get to be social with anybody is, I think, overall it’s more positive if I’m gonna tell you than negative. And I don’t know that anyone wants to hear that, but I don’t know, you learn a lot in these pandemics, right?

0:35:54

Rich Bendis:

Yeah. I think we’re blessed to be in the BioHealth industry every day, how we are essential, the people in our industry are essential, and they make a big difference around the world on people’s health, so it’s a great industry to be in at this time, and hopefully—one of the things you said earlier was looking at ways to do the collaboration sustainability. I think if people recognize the good that’s come out of this adverse situation that we’re in right now, I think that collaboration sustainability is really critical for all of us. But you recognized it, you’ve already had a session on it, and I think that’s something to build upon for the state within BioForward and within the BioHealth industry. So I congratulate you on recognizing that and hopefully more people will step on the same bandwagon with you about how critical this is. And I think they probably are

understanding how important the BioHealth industry is to the state when they may not have paid as much attention to it before. So, yeah.

0:36:55

Lisa Johnson: Yeah, I mean, that's why we've also made investments into economic impact reports. I know others do it as well, but we really saw that as an industry that, again, trying to say beyond just what we've been talking about with COVID is, "Let me give you even data." So, every other year, we're trying to come out with those impact reports to just really show the state and be able to publicize there's a lot happening in this industry and having a major impact. I think that's important to continue to do so that when we tell these stories, we can also then swing back and say, "Well, and I even have further data to prove our impact."

Rich Bendis: Sometimes it depends on the quality of that data?

Lisa Johnson: That's true. That's true. Good point.

Rich Bendis: Independence of that data. But I think if you don't have the data to back it up, then you won't have a lot of people believe in you. But I wanna really close now and talk about your vision for the future, Lisa. We've had this last half hour with Lisa Johnson, the CEO of BioForward. Let's give the listeners a little vision about what you see as the future for the BioHealth industry in Wisconsin and around the world.

0:38:04

Lisa Johnson: Well, I think my vision is just that we have really opened the eyes of the entire nation that there is much more happening in the Midwest. I might have told you, Rich, it really makes me upset when I hear coastal media describing the Wisconsin, Michigan, Pennsylvanias as rust belt states. We are not rust belt. We are a powerful state and we are making an impact not just in the state, obviously nationally. My vision is what can we do as an association, even though we're small, but what can we do to start to change the mindset and understanding in this nation of what—so much is happening—I've heard heartland; I like Midwest myself—but there is a lot happening here and it starts with our major research institutions throughout this region.

0:38:56 Kinda continuing on what we're doing, but I think even your point about hey, next step for maybe BioForward is capital. Yeah. I think it's that constant change. If you don't constantly change and question yourself, you're not going to make it. You have to continually be critical of yourself and whether our industry—that's how you move forward. I think I'll just continue to do that [laughs].

Rich Bendis: Keep doing what you're doing, right?

Lisa Johnson: That's right.

Rich Bendis: BioForward membership is lucky to have Lisa as their leader and the passion that you bring to what you do every day, so—

Lisa Johnson: Thank you.

Rich Bendis: Keep up your passion, your persistence, and the patience, which I know is tough.

Lisa Johnson: It is tough. I'm gonna keep that in my head though. I was listening, did you hear that? I was listening, so I got it in my head.

Rich Bendis: Yeah, but let's prove to people that the Midwest and sort of the flyover and drive-through regions of the country have as much to offer as those coastal regions everybody talks about, right?

Lisa Johnson: Right.

Rich Bendis: Lisa, thank you for being on *BioTalk*. This is Lisa Johnson, CEO of BioForward in Wisconsin. Pay attention to it. It's one of the up and coming ecosystems in the country. Thanks, Lisa.

Lisa Johnson: There we go. Thank you.

Narrator: Thanks for listening to *BioTalk* with Rich Bendis.

End of Recording