

Lam_Pat

[0:00:01]

Riggenbach: Today is January 28, 2022. My name is Amanda Riggenbach, and I am the manager for the Tumultuous 2020 oral history project at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. I'm currently in the ALPL's recording studio with Patrick Lam. We're going to be talking about his experiences as a senior assisted living director at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic for the Tumultuous 2020 oral history project. Thank you so much, Patrick, for being here.

[0:00:30]

Lam: Thank you, Amanda, for inviting me for this interview. I really appreciate it.

Riggenbach: And I know that you've actually done some interviews here before with the former director of oral history, Mark Depew, so we do kind of have a bit of a background on you, but I still like to start these interviews with some basic information, like when and where were you born.

Lam: I was born in Vietnam, Saigon, Vietnam, in 1972. And I came to the United States on a boat. We used to call it boat people.

[0:01:00]

Left there in 1979 and ended up on an island, Indonesian island, for about nine months. Set up refugee camp there. And then after that, we got lucky. We were sponsored to come to the United States in 1980. And I've been living in the Midwest since then. Chicago is where I grew up when I came to the United States.

[0:01:30]

And I've been traveling around to different states for school, colleges. And right now, I have a family. We're currently living in Chatham, Illinois, a great place to raise a family. And this is where I ended up, and I've been in the medical field for many years. I started in the senior assisted living community since 2012.

Riggenbach: Yeah, that's one thing I was going to ask about, is about your schooling. Did you always know that you wanted to go to medical school?

[0:02:02]

Lam: You know, I like to get into an industry where you get reward for working hard, that people enjoy the time that you're sharing with them, taking care of them. And I started out with – my first year in college was as an engineer. But I felt for some reason something drew me into the health field.

[0:02:27]

So we make changes through our life, and I ended up deciding that the health field is where I wanted to work as my career.

Riggenbach: And where did you go for medical school?

Lam_Pat

Lam: I went to Saba University School of Medicine. It's in the Netherlands Antilles. I chose that path because I kind of wanted to see what it's like to go back to the Caribbean. It's the tropics, where I spent, again, nine months on an island. So I decided just to go back there and to study abroad, enjoy what it's like. So it was a great experience to do that.

[0:03:04]

Riggenbach: And is that where you met your wife?

Lam: Oh no, I met my wife when I did my training back in the United States. I did training with the University of Chicago. I did my rotations, and that's how I met her. She was a pharmacy student.

Riggenbach: And did you guys get married after you were done with the training aspect of your job?

Lam: Yes.

[0:03:29] And then we settled down, and that's when we moved from Chicago to Chatham.

Riggenbach: How did you hear about Chatham?

Lam: Well, my wife had a job offer with Walgreens, so it was a good offer, and it's a small town. We left Chicago because of the traffic, the hectic lifestyle. I mean, to go anywhere, you're looking at an hour one way. Sometimes just to go grocery it takes that long.

[0:03:59] So it was not worth the time in traffic. And she was saying that it would take her an hour and a half just to drive to work. So it was the perfect timing for us. We relocated, ended up in Chatham, and that's when I found my calling, the senior assisted living community.

Riggenbach: And tell me about the first job that you had in the assisted living.

[0:04:27]

Lam: It was right next door to my neighborhood, and I applied, and I applied for the Villas of Hollybrook. And I was accepted, a position. I'm grateful for the owner, Mr. Reggie Phillips, and Mr. Glenn Mathias. The two original owners of – partners – the Villas of Hollybrook. And I started there in 2012. And they expanded a great deal since then. There were only five communities when I first started with the company.

[0:05:00] And when I left the company in 2018, there were at least 20 communities built by the organization.

Riggenbach: What was your position.

Lam_Pat

Lam: I was an executive director, so basically oversee the operations of the community that I was in charge with. We went from – in Chatham, there wasn't any before, so we went from one community. Within a year, we were able to fill up 90%.

[0:05:31] So the owner decided to build another one for the memory care, because that is on the rise as far as dementia, you know, Alzheimer dementia and other types, increasing in our population. So we built that, and we got that filled, and then decided to build another one in Chatham. He built the Villas of South Park, which is also under the parent company, the Villas of Hollybrook.

Riggenbach: And what was it that makes this field your calling?

[0:06:01]

Lam: I just feel that I have a connection with the seniors. For some reason, I can understand and be able to appreciate what they've gone through. I think it's our obligation to take care of our seniors in the community. They laid the foundation for us to be here, and we want to make sure that they enjoy whatever time they have left on earth with us.

[0:06:32] And I get a lot of feedback from family members that we're providing great services for them. Without these communities, with other communities building the same type of facilities, it's a great benefit to help our seniors. Because it's a different lifestyle with families with both husband and wife working, and you can't take care of the parents at home.

[0:06:57] With the rise in dementia, that's definitely a need, because it does affect family a lot, tremendously, if you have to take care of your parents with needs. So these communities are there to provide the care for our residents and their families as well. So it's a great service. I think every organization that opened an assisted living community, they're there with a big heart to take care of their seniors, even though it's struggling times right now with Covid and the pandemic going on.

[0:07:32] Staffing is sort of an issue that's been facing the industry.

Riggenbach: Yeah, and so I was doing some research on the assisted living communities throughout the years, and it sounds like staffing is something that's been an issue for quite a while. Obviously with the pandemic, that's a whole different story that we can get into, but in your time with the Villas of Hollybrook, what seemed to be the – if you feel comfortable answering this – the biggest issues that the industry, or your community specifically, were facing?

[0:08:08]

- Lam: You know, given that we hire a lot of CNAs, it's a stepping stone for the nursing industry. So we understand that students come in, they get their CNA, and they move on to get their nursing degree. Their ambition is to get hired to get a bachelor's in nursing or RN degree.
- [0:08:30] So it's a high turnover that you're looking at, just because it's not a very high paying position. It's a rewarding position, and it's great for those who like to stay a CNA and caregiver, but again, they like to move on, and they like to make more higher salary. So I think that's a challenge, is, where do we draw the line as far as pay is concerned?
- [0:08:56] You know, if you pay out too much, then you can lower your profit level. So I understand companies have to make a profit to stay. They take a lot of risks as far as liability is concerned. So I think overall, the industry needs to be able to some way change that and increase the pay. But to be cost effective overall. So I think that's the challenge, is to be able to keep good staff, to be able to pay them the salary or the rate that they need.
- [0:09:29] And most of the time, when staff are the good ones, they move on to a higher degree and higher position with other industry, hospital and clinics. So that's challenging. But it wasn't that bad. The pandemic I think really made it difficult for all the industry, for facilities to keep staff onboard.
- Riggenbach: Most definitely. And we will absolutely discuss that.
- [0:10:00] I am curious, though, about what your daily experience was in a non pandemic world as an assisted living director.
- Lam: You know, on a daily level, you deal with staff coming into work, make sure that they do their job for the residents, take care of our seniors. The challenge is the workload that they have.
- [0:10:29] Even before the pandemic, you had staff coming in, and if they don't do 100% the job that they are hired for, then you deal with complaints. And it's a given. I think in healthcare, especially in the nursing field, you have to face, make sure that the residents get their medication on time, make sure they're taking care of their ADLs we call it, activities of daily living. So ADLs are something that you have to find the staff that have a passion for this.
- [0:11:01] I tell all my staff, if they just show up for a paycheck, they're not going to last. They have to enjoy what they do, and they have to enjoy working with the seniors in conditions that's not typical of other industries. So it's hard. It's a difficult workload, but if they love what they do, it makes the day go by a lot better.
- [0:11:27] You know, as an executive director, I oversee the activity department, the dining department, the nursing department. So you can make sure – and

marketing also. So to keep staff onboard, and then to bring in more residents. So you have our seniors, they're there for a short period of time, and unfortunately, they move on, sometimes to a nursing home when they get to a level when we can't take care of them.

[0:12:01] If they're fully bedridden, then we have to find nursing home to place them. So that's the hard part, is to part with our residents who have become part of our family already. We see them on a daily basis. So yeah, that's some of the challenges that you see in that industry.

Riggenbach: And what's exactly the difference between a senior assisted living community and a nursing home?

[0:12:29]

Lam: In a nursing home, the levels of care is the big difference. As far as policy is concerned, assisted living community, they have to be ambulating, meaning they cannot be bedridden. If they're on a wheelchair, they have to be able to transfer themselves. They have to be able to move around the community for safety reasons. If there's an emergency, they have to be evacuated. So when they get to the point where they're bedridden, then we have to find a nursing home for them to go to.

[0:12:57] Unless they get hospice onboard, then we can have extra help coming in. But there's a limit where the assisted living, it's licensed by the Illinois department of public health, so we have to follow the rules, implement the policies. So they can be 100% independent and live there, but they have to be mobile.

Riggenbach: That makes a lot of sense and definitely clears up the experience.

[0:13:29] And when did you first have your daughters, because I know that was part of the reason you think looked at Chatham, was because it was a good place to raise children?

Lam: You know, after we met and later we were done with – my wife's finishing up with her degree – and we decided to have a kid, because I'm not a young person anymore. So we decided to go – my first child was born in 2004.

[0:14:02] And she's everything we ever wanted in a kid, and she's very easy. And then a few years later, we decided to have another one. And they're everything to us. I think having kids and family creates a bond that would keep your family active and it creates a family environment where the kids can enjoy.

[0:14:30] So yeah, after having our first one and then the second one came along, we decided just to find a smaller town to raise a family and this is how we ended up in Chatham.

Lam_Pat

Riggenbach: So it sounds like you're a person who really enjoys the aspects of being a parent.

Lam: There are ups and downs. You know, my girls are teenagers now, so it comes with the territory, I guess. But yes, I would never change it for anything.

[0:15:00]

Riggenbach: And then I'm curious to know what made you decide to leave the Villas of Hollybrook.

Lam: I left the Villas of Hollybrook because, again, it gets to the point where you get constant drama that comes with the work. And having my teenage daughters with me and needing dad more around, I decided just to take on a lighter role, so that I could spend more time with them.

[0:15:35] You know, I get to the point where we get call at 2:00 in the morning or somebody doesn't show up to work at the night shift, you have to come in to cover. And years ago, I could do that, but you get to a certain age where you have to stay up all night covering shifts, and then it throws your day off the next day.

[0:15:57] So I was looking for a work life balance.

Riggenbach: I know that sometimes the impression of an executive director is very removed from the day to day of an operation, but it sounds like you were very much involved, especially being the one to cover the shifts. That's not something I've ever really heard of before.

Lam: When you're hired on for that position, you do the paperwork, you manage the budget and all that, but you also make sure that – you know, the way I work is, I like to be involved with my staff.

[0:16:32] You can't lead a team without being a good example. So if they're short on the floor – and this works for all the other directors. Other directors, the same way. They have to come in and cover the shift if nobody shows up. Because it's a 24 hour business. You can't just close off the office at 4:30 and go home. So the seniors there deserve the level of care that you have to provide, at their expectation. They're there around the clock. Midnight, 2:00, 3:00 a.m. in the morning.

[0:16:58] If they need medication, you have to have your nurse onboard. So even though I come into work in a suit, but I take off that suit and I'm on the floor if I have to help out my staff so that they know that you're there not only to lead the team, but also to work alongside with them. And there's no work that's too

much or not good enough for a director. You help out your team, and that's how you lead them by example.

[0:17:28] You get involved, and also, you know what their work is like. You appreciate them, the work that they do every day for you. So yeah.

Riggenbach: Did the people, your staff, did they seem to appreciate that approach?

Lam: Yes, they like it. I mean, some comment that they've never seen somebody work with staff like I did. But I said, I've seen that with other directors. They have to work as hard as I do too. So it's very common in this industry, when you're given the community, and you're in charge, and the parent company is two hours away.

[0:18:02] You sign a contract with the owner, your boss, that you're taking care of that regardless. It is your baby. You have to manage that good and bad times as well. So it comes with the territory. I enjoyed it tremendously, just because I know that I connect a lot with the community and the family members. They show their appreciation, and that's the rewarding part of it.

[0:18:28] They would come and say, oh, we appreciate you so much, and your staff, and that was the best part of that job, was I had good staff working. And the one that's good, I like them to be rewarded more for their work. Unfortunately, across the industry, that's starting salary or pay for the staff. But I wouldn't change it for the world. It's a good position for someone that does not have family commitment.

[0:19:01] I have, like I said, my daughters are in high school, getting ready to go to college. I didn't want to spend long days at work. I wanted to spend time with them before they go to college. I think once they're away, then I'll have plenty of time, and maybe I might visit that industry again.

Riggenbach: And so you mentioned that you've built a lot of bonds with the families there.

[0:19:28] Do you still sometimes think about them, specific people?

Lam: Yes, yes. You know, my long time residents, who I took care of for years, I still stay in touch with some of their family members who I connected very well with. Unfortunately, I would say the residents that I took care of at the Villas of Hollybrook since 2012, I would say probably 90% already passed away because of age and illnesses and so forth.

[0:19:59] So that's the sad part of it, but the good part is family members still stay in touch with me from time to time to see how things are going. So it stays with you, yeah, the good things.

Riggenbach: Absolutely. And did that make it difficult to leave in 2018?

Lam_Pat

Lam: Yes, I thought about it for months, leaving the residents. I've been a part of their family for so many years.

[0:20:29] But at the end of the day, you think about what's best for your family, for your kids, and my girls needed me at that time. I made sure that when I left that my staff understand that this is a good thing that they're doing and to keep up with it and do a great job. Because these residents, they deserve the best that we can provide for them.

Riggenbach: Most definitely.

[0:20:59] What was the position that you took when you were done?

Lam: When I left there, I went to the department of revenue, just get back to the States. My goal, I wanted to hopefully get a position in the Illinois Department of Public Health or the Department of Aging. Again, my passion is in senior care. So just to get my foot into the door with the state department. So I was a revenue specialist with the Illinois Department of Revenue.

[0:21:34]

Riggenbach: That seems like a far stretch from the medical and healthcare field.

Lam: Yes, it was. Just because, again, there wasn't any position to apply for that was available at the time, and again, I can't stay home and not work. So, you know, I want to keep myself busy. So just to get my foot into the door, to get certified with the state, and then there will be hopefully a position available for me as well.

[0:22:01]

Riggenbach: No, that makes a lot of sense. And you were there from 2018 to...?

Lam: I was there for two years. A little bit over two years. Unfortunately, there wasn't any management position available in the Department of Public Health or Department of Aging. So I saw a position available with Cedarhurst.

[0:22:28] I've known the CEO there for many years, because he's visited me when I was at the Villas of Hollybrook. So I reached out and said, you know, you have a position open in Springfield, I'd like to see if I can help. Because I know when a director leaves, they need to replace someone, the leader of the building, community, to keep it going. So I reached out, and I was very fortunate that they said, okay, come back and work for us.

[0:22:57] So I came back. I left the revenue just because there wasn't any management position available with the state that I like. So I thought, you know, my girls are doing okay in high school, let's try that. So I went back and took that position with Cedarhurst.

Lam_Pat

Riggenbach: And that was in March of 2021?

Lam: Right, correct.

Riggenbach: So before we start diving into that, I would be curious to know more about your pandemic experience in 2020.

[0:23:27] So did you know much about the virus in the early months of 2020?

Lam: As far as work is concerned, I was working with the revenue and we had to start working from home. So in a way, it was a blessing, because I was able to work at home for a while, for almost I think at least half a year. And having my girls upstairs and I'm working in the basement, that was a great time. It was a blessing in disguise for me to work and also to be around my girls.

[0:24:02] I couldn't ask for a better time with them. And of course my girls were going through challenges with being locked down at home, so they had to be online studying. So they went through a lot of difficult time as well, being away from friends and teachers. They like that social interaction, so that was hard. But again, I was able to be home with them.

[0:24:26] And then when I started with the Cedarhurst community, the environment was worse, just because of the challenge of getting staff onboard. We faced a lot of problems with unpredictable work hours, people calling off because of the pandemic. Tests had to be done. People wearing masks.

[0:24:59] You had to deal with a lot of resistance on vaccines. Some family members refused to get vaccines. I didn't realize how difficult it was in that industry when I came back. It was going pretty well in the first few months. I was able to get more residents, and I had recruited new staff onboard at Cedarhurst. Grew really well until three or four months later, where the other industries were offering more.

[0:25:33] Higher pay for staff to go to. So we had even worse turnover during that time, than it was before with the Villas of Hollybrook. Even though the company, Cedarhurst, tried its its best to provide financial support, bonuses to get staff coming in, it's just hard to find good help.

[0:25:59]

Riggenbach: And so you talked about the first months going relatively well. Was it a little bit like a homecoming to be back in the senior assisted living community?

Lam: Yes, it was kind of walking down memory lane for me. Great being with the residents, getting to meet their family members, having new staff and training. I felt like I fit right in. The census was going up. People needed help.

Lam_Pat

[0:26:31] I just feel really bad that we had to implement policies on keeping social distancing. It was a lot of challenge for staff. For example, in the dining room, they had to serve in trays. Everybody were locked in their room until we had the green light to go to let the residents out. We had to test staff every time coming in, make sure they're safe.

[0:26:55] Residents and visitors, also make sure that they come in and they fill out the form and do the vitals, and again, do the daily test that we have and make sure that we keep track of their vaccine cards. So the challenges were a lot more than before the pandemic. It was hard on the staff, it was hard on the family members, not getting to be close with their loved one. We had to separate them when they come in at the beginning when I started.

[0:27:27] Between them, keep a distance. When they meet, can't come close. But a few months after that, everybody was testing negative, everyone's good. So we had the green light. Vaccines were out. So families were able to come out to visit more and residents were able to get out of their room and then dine together in the dining room. But we still made sure that they were tested negative, just to make sure they were safe.

Riggenbach: Yeah, no, I mean, I'm sure there was so many different things that you needed to think of beforehand.

[0:28:01] And so by the spring of 2021, the vaccines were available to all Illinois residents 16 and above. Or by April that was. So like you said, that brought about new changes. But when you first started, what was the vaccine rates like in the community?

Lam: We made sure – I would say 99% of our residents were vaccinated.

[0:28:30] Only one or two refused to. So we made sure that they wear masks if they are not vaccinated. As far as staff is concerned, they have to double mask. So N95 and the surgical mask. And that posed another challenge. It's hard to breathe through the masks, so staff, when they have to work late, you know, hard cleaning, taking care of, and sweating, those masks are making it very difficult for them to work.

[0:29:00] So also, the challenge to our department heads to make sure that all staff keep their mask on. So it was difficult all around.

Riggenbach: And you were coming in after everyone had gone through the pandemic already for a year.

Lam: Correct, yes.

Riggenbach: And I found some dates, and it was insane reading about the numbers of long term care facility staff and residents who were dying from Covid.

Lam_Pat

[0:29:32] Especially in the beginning, before vaccines were available. Did you have any concern about that when you decided to go back?

Lam: You know, to be honest with you I was not aware how challenging it was with the assisted living community. I know that they have protocols they have to keep, wearing masks.

[0:29:56] When I started, Cedarhurst did a great job, and I'm sure other companies did also, of maintaining their social distancing, make sure everybody's vaccinated, protected. So we checked on a daily if not weekly basis, make sure everybody's up to date with their vaccines. You know, again, just the hard part was staff calling off. If they have some kind of symptoms that we're worried about, fever, coughing, complaining of body aches, they stay home.

[0:30:27] So we ended up paying a lot out of expenses for agency and getting help. From agencies, it's not the biggest thing for us, because they don't know the residents very well. So I think that's still, as far as I know, still a problem right now for a lot of places.

Riggenbach: And like you mentioned earlier, with people working, CNAs and assisted living facilities, if you're doing it just for a paycheck, you're not going to last.

[0:31:02]

Lam: Correct.

Riggenbach: So I imagine that's even more difficult during a pandemic when you desperately need people.

Lam: Yeah. I feel very unfortunate, the problems that face that industry is you have other industries that are paying as well, and they have more predictable hours. When you have staff that already worked their shift, and they can't leave unless another person comes in to replace them, that makes it difficult for those staff.

[0:31:33] And we were giving out bonuses to get people to come into work, and for some reason, I don't know, maybe they're getting government pay to not work as – I don't know what the problem's out there. I think it has to be corrected all across. Policies have to be changed, be made, so that people come out to work more.

[0:31:56] I have staff that said that they get more pay staying home than coming to work, so it's hard for us to motivate them. There's no incentive for them to come out to work. I mean, we were offering \$150 to \$200 bonus just to come out to work, and even then, it was hard for me to find staff to do that. And I see – I feel really bad, because I know the residents are the ones that ultimately will be suffering from this.

Lam_Pat

[0:32:26]

Riggenbach: And just starting a little bit, because it's such a difficult topic, to think about how these shortages affect the residents, is that something that you saw very clearly?

Lam: You know, if you're in there long enough, and I was there for six months, it does affect the residents, because if they're – let's say you normally have three staff for that shift, and if one calls off, what are you going to do?

[0:33:00]

So it also caused difficult for the department heads. Our nurses, the director of nursing had to come in to cover a lot of shifts, long hours. They've been there, and they can't go home because the staff didn't show up. Same thing with my position. We jump in and we ask for other department heads to help out as well. They all got pretty much burned out from that. And the organization's doing its best to help out, but where do you draw the line?

[0:33:32]

You can't just throw money out and say, okay, we'll give you double bonus, whatever, to come in. The pay sometimes doesn't correlate with the level of care, the quality of care. People just show up just for that. So there were good staff. There were good staff, but the problem is, the good staff are also exhausted trying to cover the ones that don't show up. So I hope that changes soon.

[0:33:58]

I don't know how that's going to be corrected over the near future, but something has to be done about it.

Riggenbach:

And so kind of going back a little bit, when you first started, you mentioned that staff needed to double mask, the unvaccinated need to wear a mask, but those who are vaccinated didn't need to?

Lam:

No, they still have to wear masks.

[0:34:27]

Minimal surgical mask. So when I left, everybody was still wearing masks. I know that we keep track of the residents very well. We've had a couple of cases. If somebody's tested positive because they had a family member visiting, we have to quarantine the place, their apartment up, and make sure to follow the trail, who they contacted with, make sure our staff are completely gowned up when they go into the room.

[0:34:57]

So it was pretty hard to see, that they all have to deal with that. It affects everybody.

Riggenbach:

And I have also read some articles where in the beginning of the pandemic, visitation was just completely shut down. People couldn't visit their family members. And then I believe CMS, which is the Centers for Medicare and

Medicaid Services, came out with saying that it's actually, you're not allowed to completely shut down visitors.

[0:35:31] Because of the emotional damage that zero visitation can have. So when you joined, people were allowed to come visit?

Lam: Absolutely, yeah. So I was I guess fortunate enough to didn't have to face that. But I've been – you know, when I was with the state, I still stayed in touch with family members back in Chatham that I've been connected with, and they said it was a very, very difficult time. I see it on the news as well.

[0:35:58] But when I started, they allowed visitors, even the ones that at first couple of months, they had to separate from the table, they had to divide, put a barrier between them. But after a while, it got lowered down, because we went to green, meaning the level that is safe for the residents to go about their community. So no, when I started, the organization at Cedarhurst already allowed visitors.

Riggenbach: What were those levels of safety?

[0:36:31]

Lam: You have red, which is no visitors at all, and I believe you go to yellow, and then green. Green is good, yeah. So anytime you have a multiple staff that – the fact that we have to kind of do tests. Yellow is when we do a lot of testing on a weekly basis. So we have everybody, staff coming in, do the test and get the PCR test, which is confirmation test. Takes a couple of days.

[0:36:59] Even that was a challenge before I left, because it usually takes a day or two to come back. Sometimes it took three days. Because the testing center was short staffed also. So they were running into problems as well. And I have family members who work for other industry healthcare fields industry, they run into the same problem with staffing as well. So definitely a challenging time for everybody overall.

Riggenbach: I do not doubt it.

[0:37:30] And again, kind of comparing from the beginning of the pandemic to when you joined Cedarhurst, I also read that a lot of places, you know, residents were isolated to their rooms.

Lam: Mm-hm.

Riggenbach: And so by the time you got there, it sounds like things were opening back up, so were they already just allowed to go into the dining room and move about, as you said?

[0:37:57]

Lam_Pat

Lam: When I started, they were still isolated in their room, because the dining staff had to deliver trays every day, three meals a day. That definitely took away the dining experience with the residents. And they don't want to be isolated, so it was hard for the residents. It was hard for the staff. But they did their work, and they tried their best, given the condition. So I think after a month or two, we were able to slowly let residents out, and then when I left, all of them were allowed to come out, except the ones that refused to get vaccinated.

[0:38:34] But yeah, I don't know what it is like now, but I know that I still stay in touch with some staff members, and they say it's still challenging times to get staff to come onboard to help as well.

Riggenbach: Yeah, I mean, I imagine that when you had to deliver the food, when you're short staffed, that would be quite a challenge.

Lam: Yes, yes, it was.

[0:38:56] We had to get all our available staff onboard, take turns to come out and help out. But the hard part is when you're out there, you can't do the old work. So again, facing that. But if you have a good staff, I think, and the right ones onboard, they will pull their weight, and they will do the work. Again, it's a hard work for the staff. What they do on the floor, what they do for the residents, on a daily basis.

[0:39:28] Definitely a noble profession for the staff out there on the floor. They are the asset of the communities.

Riggenbach: And I know initially as well, for every healthcare industry, personal protective equipment was in short supply. When you started, was that really a concern?

[0:39:57]

Lam: I think the company did an awesome job of getting those ready. I met with the department – you know, corporate. I think every week we had meetings to talk about who needs equipment, who needs PPE. They have plenty. They have plenty coming in. They made sure that it's well stocked and available, so it wasn't a big problem.

[0:40:27]

Riggenbach: And what is the structure like in terms of the staff? I know that there are the CNAs, and then there are the nurses. Would the number of CNAs typically be more than the number of nurses and so forth? How is that structured?

Lam: Sure. CNAs usually are the most number in any community, because they do the – you know, they're at the ground zero. They do all the work there. They come in, they take care of the residents to help them with their ADLs.

Lam_Pat

[0:40:56] So CNAs are the most staff, and then you have the dining department. Then you have the nurse. And when I say nurse, I'm talking about LPNs or RNs. We don't have a lot. We just need to make sure that the nurses are there to provide – they have to administer medication. The CNAs are not allowed to do that, so we have to have at least two nurses, preferably three or more.

[0:41:27] And then the dining is the next one, and then you have just one person marketing. You have one person in the business office, you have me to oversee. Then you have a front desk, concierge. And then drivers. Just one driver. And then you have two people usually for activities. So CNAs definitely the highest numbers we have to have.

Riggenbach: And so I imagine with them being in short supply, it really affected the entire institution.

Lam: Yeah, the whole – all the way up to us. Because then every department has to figure out how to pitch in to help out, alternate.

[0:42:01] And then the weekends, so we alternate. So they had a really good arrangement where I was able to have staff situated where every weekend, we alternate staff. At least there has to be a manager onboard. We had a manager onboard every day until 6:30, 7:00 at night. Make sure everybody's safe, make sure nobody just walked in without any PPE protection for the residents.

[0:42:27] Our main concern is, make sure the residents are safe. And I had some challenging times where family members said, you know, upset, not wanting to wear masks, it's ridiculous, all this stuff. You see that, yeah. And it blows my mind, because this is for your protection for your loved one and for the residents in the community. Why not just do that? But I'm sure other communities sometimes run into that as well.

Riggenbach: Most definitely.

[0:42:57] What was the spirit like of the residents? I mean, I imagine it would have been very lonely to be in their rooms.

Lam: Yeah, you know, when I came, they all seemed like it was a depressing time, because they didn't get to go out. Once we had a green light to let them out to eat, very excited. They loved the activities. They loved the outings. Company bus to take them out, go to doctors' appointments.

[0:43:30] So a lot of family members just want visitors, just a chance to go out. And some are comfortable just being in their room. So it depends. Depend. But definitely, getting out of isolation is a big, big plus, because the main experience in assisted living is the dining experience and the activities. If you

have those two going really well for you, doing a good job at that, I think that will help them with the quality of care that they ask for and deserve.

[0:44:01]

Riggenbach: What was that turning point that started making your position – I know you said the first three months were really great. What was it that kind of shifted that made it not so great?

Lam: You know, the deciding factor for me to leave the industry again was – again, hugely due to staff shortage. The high staff turnover.

[0:44:27]

I know that a lot of us mentioned to our company the challenges, and they acknowledged that as well. But there wasn't a lot of change that could be done, just because of the pandemic. And again, the companies I'm sure are doing their best. I decided to step away because looking back, having my 14 year old starting high school, I did not want to work long hours, unpredictable hours, having to make sure my phone are checked on all the time.

[0:45:07]

I didn't get the quality time that I wanted with my girls. Even though I loved the industry, it's a great place to work, I did not want to be called at 2:00, 3:00 in the morning or having to get up in the middle of the night to come in because staff decided not to stay because they're stressed out and they're burned out.

[0:45:33]

And I didn't see changes forthcoming, and I felt that – you know, the decision that I left was because I didn't feel I was able to provide service or assure my residents the kind of level of care that they deserve.

Riggenbach:

Given the amount of shortages you had with CNAs, in our pre-interview, you mentioned that there was a lot of use of traveling CNAs or agencies.

[0:46:03]

Lam:

Yes. For my communities, and I know from other directors that I've spoken with, getting agency is – it's great that they are able to do that, but they were short as well. So when you schedule agency, and they didn't show up for it, and the company's already paying double salary, and they don't show up, and then you're short staffed. And then, again, every department head is burned out because they have to take turns to come in.

[0:46:32]

You know, you don't know what you get when agency comes in. You can get a really good staff. I think because they're only there for the day, I don't know if they have their heart in the right place. Again, some might just show up for the paycheck. So that was really hard to see, and it was hard for me to see my nurses, the ones that showed up to work, that felt difficult for them to

continue to work because they can't do shift and then be expected to do more work after they've already done their part.

[0:47:08] So I felt bad for the good staff that were there when I left. But again, it was just – you get to the point where when you're home with your loved ones, your mind's not there. You're physically there, but your mind is at work and constantly worrying about who's going to call off the next day.

[0:47:28] And then you'll get complaints from residents and family members because we didn't have the right staff onboard. I mean, the ones that are really good. But they can only do so much.

Riggenbach: How is it that the agencies are able to pay double?

Lam: Well, the company's paying the agency staff a lot. So that part of the agency, I don't know, but I know that even our nurses dealt with a lot of problems of not getting agency nurses onboard on time.

[0:48:06] They're supposed to show up. They don't show up on time. And it's frustrating, because they're getting paid twice as much and not doing a great job sometimes. So I don't think any communities would like to resort to agency just because we'd rather have our staff, because our staff know the residents.

[0:48:30] They know what they need on a daily basis. And it was hard for the residents to have new staff. When you have residents with dementia, they're used to seeing the same staff every day, and that's what you want for structure. You know, same staff, they're familiar with the – you know, friendly demeanor and used to the same staff, and you have a new staff coming onboard, just for a day or two, that kind of throws their day off.

[0:48:58] And it's hard for them to see that as well.

Riggenbach: That makes a lot of sense. Wow. And then so one of the things that I thought was really interesting that you mentioned during our pre-interview was that during this time, while you're working these hours, at the same time, your wife is being overworked as a pharmacist.

Lam: Yeah.

Riggenbach: You mentioned that she works – how many hours was it?

[0:49:26]

Lam: Long hours. Very long hours. Double shift. But, you know, I think they're facing the same way. They're short on pharmacy technicians, just like I was short with CNAs. And then you have patients or customers getting inpatient because same situation. And if you have a technician that's not showing up

for work, the pharmacist have to do all the work, carry the load, and answering phone calls and ring the customer up.

[0:49:58] So it's still there. She still works long hours, double shift. So she works 80, 90 hours a week sometimes. But you do what you can. She does what she can to help out the organization. And again, every organization – I think they're doing their best that they can to keep good staff.

[0:50:27] But there's only so much that you can until staff just couldn't bear the work environment and have to find something that has a more work life balance. Because I think at the end of the day, that's the most important thing. You don't want to burn out and then miss out on your kids growing up. So that time, you cannot buy that back.

Riggenbach: Absolutely. And one of the things that you had mentioned was that made it so difficult was that you weren't able to fire people for not doing a good job because of the immense shortage of staff.

[0:51:04]

Lam: Yeah, that frustrates me the most, because I remember in the early days, when I started that you had staff that if they're not doing a good job, you can write them up, discipline them. Now I felt that I couldn't do that, and staff were sneaking around using their cellphones.

[0:51:29] And if I wrote them up so many times, I would have to let them go. So you kind of have to turn your eyes the other way and just ignore – you know, know where to pick your battles, right? So we had to lower our standards. I let them get away with that, but then the bad side to that is that the quality of care for the residents. But I couldn't say, okay, you're fired because you've been told many times not to do this, but then who's going to fill in for them?

[0:51:59] So it gets to the point where you just have to kind of overlook and just ignore certain things that normally you would not as a director, because you want the best care for your residents. But it's unfortunate. Very sad, yeah.

Riggenbach: And was it around September when you ended up leaving, then?

Lam: Yeah, it was September. I put in my resignation.

[0:52:31] I met up with my boss and my very nice friend who gave me the opportunity to come back, and I just kind of told them, I need to just step back from this. It's unfortunate, but it's taking a lot of me from – honestly, I don't mind working long hours, I just want to, when I'm off, be able to spend time with the family without worrying about who's calling off in the middle of the night and so forth.

Lam_Pat

[0:53:04] But that's the industry that comes with that. I think it's something for someone who has no family obligation, who's able to stay there long hours and be able to absorb all the issues that's going on. So that's important. But you can't enjoy time with your loved ones if you have all that in your thought process.

[0:53:28] That's affecting your peace of mind at home as well. So yeah, again, I think all the companies – the two companies I've been with, they are great companies to work for. They always do their best to provide whatever is needed for the residents and for the staff. But again, you know, you can't just pour all the financial resources to get things going, because then it's difficult for a company to stay in business if they lose all that.

[0:54:05] Yeah, the finance. So it's hard. It's just a hard time for them.

Riggenbach: I mean, I think I read in the State Journal Register that one of the longtime – I think it might be a nursing home, not an assisted living community – I think is it Saint Joseph's or Saint John's?

Lam: Yeah, I saw that in the paper, yeah.

Riggenbach: Recently is closing. And I think partly because of different Covid aspects.

[0:54:30] Did the – not to go back a little bit, but did the Delta variant cause any issues in the assisted living community?

Lam: You know, that came up just prior to me leaving, so no. I mean, if everybody's vaccinated, but they follow the rules, it will be fine. I mean, it won't be as bad. I don't think that affected that much.

[0:54:57] It affects those who didn't vaccinate, who refuse to still go against science, and I believe science is there to help us, not to hurt us.

Riggenbach: So it sounds like you yourself were probably vaccinated?

Lam: Oh, yes. You know, when we met the criteria, we got vaccinated, especially healthcare workers. And then of course I made my kids are protected as well. If you're protected, then the people around you are protected.

[0:55:29] You know, you have parents, grandparents living with you, and if not, you see them at holidays and so forth, so you look overall, I think it's a good situation to get yourself protected, because then it protects the people that you're with as well. I just don't understand why some people refused to get vaccinated. I understand their beliefs and so forth, but you look at the numbers, the statistics out there.

[0:56:00]

Lam_Pat

Riggenbach: When the vaccines first came out, did you think that they would be this great number of hesitancy?

Lam: You know, I never thought about it. I don't know how bad people are against the flu vaccine, but I get the vaccine every year if I can. The number of the side effects, from what I've read, is minute compared to the benefit that it could provide, so why not?

[0:56:31] You know, you look at the numbers. It's all there. So the research has proven it, our healthcare professionals, doctors, scientists. I think they're there – they have a good heart, they're there to save the public, not to harm. So I didn't realize that there was that much resistance?

[0:56:59]

Riggenbach: Did you become more confronted with it when you were back at Cedarhurst as a director?

Lam: Yeah, I mean, just like I said, a few individuals that I would run into and just constantly refuse to get vaccinated and wear masks. And it's hard for our staff to protect themselves, work in the condition and wear a mask, having difficulty breathing, and then find someone coming in not vaccinated, not wanting to wear a mask, and give a hard time about it.

[0:57:34] I don't understand that.

Riggenbach: I can imagine that all of these events were very, very challenging.

Lam: Mm-hm.

Riggenbach: And then going back to September when you resigned, you had mentioned that they found a replacement internally?

[0:57:58]

Lam: Yeah, they have someone who actually oriented me when I first came onboard. I'm glad that they have someone who's been with the community for a long time, whose heart is in the right place, because what really got me was, what's going to happen to these residents when I leave? But, you know, going back and forth for over a month, what do I do, do I continue this path and have my family life suffer?

[0:58:32] With my kids in high school and ready to go to college? Or do I leave these residents? So that was hard, but when I left, the company did – you know, I gave a month's notice, so they had an interview and did a lot of search and found someone in the organization that's able to take on the role. And I worked with her when I first started. She's really good.

Lam_Pat

[0:58:58] Again, she has a passion for this industry, so I'm glad that the residents and family members are in good hands with her.

Riggenbach: Was it this job that – I think you mentioned in the pre-interview that the person who perhaps before her was hired quit after the first day?

Lam: Yeah, so I was told by staff – by previous staff, that it was very challenging for this person.

[0:59:27] So I don't know what the reason behind that, but yeah, again, it's not for everybody. You can't just think that you take the role and be in the office and just shelve paperwork. You've got to be out there, you've got to handle all this stuff. So I don't know anything about the details of that, but I think, again, if you haven't done this before, and you jump in in the middle of a pandemic and try to handle the community, you will find it very difficult and challenging.

[1:00:00]

Riggenbach: What has your life been like since you've left? September, that's probably right as your daughters were going back to school or were in school for a month already.

Lam: Mm-hm, were in school.

Riggenbach: Did you take time off of work? Or what was your life like?

Lam: I formed an organization or a corporation for myself. My wife and I, we're fortunate enough to obtain properties.

[1:00:28] So I kept myself busy. Actually, I'm pretty involved into the business. So I'm managing all the properties we have. At the same time, be able to spend time with my kids, be able to get them breakfast before they go and then when they get home, I'm there for them. So, again, you have to decide what's best for you in your situation.

[1:00:55] I can't not do anything, so the forming of a corporation, staying busy, taking care of my tenants for those properties as well. So I've been very busy. I think everything's kind of nice now. I'm looking to get back with the state. Applied for some positions, management positions, which I like. I like to be involved with the decision making. I like the responsibility. I like to be the person to influence the success of the organization.

[1:01:31] So that's why I want to be in management and not just the person working there.

Riggenbach: Have you been able to do any trips or experiences with your daughters?

Lam_Pat

Lam: You know, just locally. You know, holidays, I was able to go up to visit my sister up north near the Wisconsin border. But again, it's limited. My daughters are very careful when it comes to the pandemic.

[1:01:59] They make sure that we have our masks on. Sometimes I have difficulty breathing because of my asthma, so I would lower my mask, and my daughters would be like, dad, you've got to put it above your nose. So with that caution, we haven't gone anywhere far. If we're going anywhere, we go usually outdoors and so forth. And then you've got the winter and all that stuff. So no, but I think it's a good time to spend time with them at home. There are things to do.

[1:02:28] We took them to the movie theater to see some movies a couple of – their movies, Marvel and stuff. But yeah, I'm blessed that I have that time with them and also be able to work on my own business as well.

Riggenbach: I didn't know that you had asthma. If you feel comfortable, did that bring about a higher level of concern if you got Covid?

Lam: Yes. I don't know where my asthma came from. I didn't have it when I was a kid.

[1:03:00] It just started maybe about a year or two ago. It started coming back again. I had it occasionally from time to time, so it's coming back. I had a difficult time with that. And again, depending on the environment – I don't know what's causing it for me. I got it under control now. I think it could be the stress level. I don't know what it is, but it's not as bad. But I have to make sure that I have medication available to help me with that.

[1:03:31]

Riggenbach: What timing to start getting these symptoms right as we get into a respiratory virus and a pandemic.

Lam: Exactly. And I feel for those who have the same problem. So I'm very careful to make sure that everybody's safe. And if I get hit with the – I don't know, but the vaccine definitely has been a positive factor in helping me with my asthma.

[1:03:58]

Riggenbach: I'm glad to hear that. And I think in our pre-interview, we discussed that you actually were recently hired for a new position that you'll be starting maybe next week?

Lam: Yeah. Back to with the revenue. Start the same position I left. It's not a manage position, but like I said, I like to stay busy. I had enough time to get my organization, the company, my own business going.

Lam_Pat

[1:04:31] And it's doing well right now, so I have time available. My kids are busy in school. So going back to that job where you can still work, stay busy, and have a work life balance. That's what I like. And yeah, so I'm glad that I'm able to get my position back with the state.

Riggenbach: Absolutely. And are your daughters happy that you're going to be getting back to a more nine to five job?

[1:05:02] Or are they disappointed that you won't be as much home?

Lam: You know, they don't have a lot of opinion on that, because they're busy at school. They're teenagers, so they enjoy their time with their friends more. Their dad is kind of second now. I'm told that once they're in their mid-20s, then they'll come back to their parents again. But I don't know. It's a day to day. They have their emotional, you know, whatever you want to call it.

[1:05:31] Teenage emotions. So I think nine to five is good, because when you're home with them, you're actually there. Again, I don't mind working long hours, but when I'm off work, I don't want to be constantly worried about what's going to be happening at work. So if I work 10, 12 hours a day, that's fine.

[1:05:58] But if I'm home, I want to be able to devote that time. You know, that quality time is not conducive for family members when you're in a work environment where you're constantly getting calls.

Riggenbach: And having tenants in the pandemic years, I'm sure that posed its own problems. There were eviction moratoriums and with rent and whatnot.

[1:06:31] Did you experience that with your tenants?

Lam: Thank goodness, no. I have wonderful tenants. I'm always there for them. They call me, I would take care of the problem within 24 hours, just because it's in the area. And I'm all about providing service, so running the community or running my own business, it's the same idea.

[1:06:59] You provide the service. That's what they're there for. And you have to make sure that you're available for them. So this actually helps me more working a balanced job where I can do that and also help my tenants. If they need it, I'm able to take care of them as soon as possible. And I've been very blessed and fortunate to have wonderful tenants that are good to me. It's a mutual relationship.

[1:07:27]

Riggenbach: That's wonderful. And then kind of moving into our concluding questions, do you think that your background coming from Vietnam to then Chicago to this Springfield/Chatham area, do you think that these experiences affected the way that you've responded to the pandemic?

Lam_Pat

Lam: You know, I think for my background, it affects every decision I make. I think because where I came from, life is tough.

[1:08:00] It's rough. Surviving all the journey to America. I think everything I do is toward providing a better lifestyle for my kids, just because we suffer a lot. I think it's a great place to be, in America. There's so many opportunities. The American Dream is still there, you just have to work for it. I don't believe in free handouts.

[1:08:30] You have to work for it. And success is in your control. How successful you want to be is how much effort do you put into it? And of course luck plays a factor to it. But my definition of luck is preparation and timing. So you prepare for it, and the time comes, then that's considered lucky, that you're ready for it.

[1:08:56] So I think of course there's still some things that I'd like to happen. I would love to continue that industry, senior care. So my goal is that hopefully I'll have a management position in the state with the Department of Public Health or with the Department of Aging. Because it's where my love is. I enjoy taking care of seniors, being involved with them.

[1:09:26] If I have to be in a position where I implement policy and so forth for the better care for our seniors, than I would love that.

Riggenbach: Absolutely. And kind of given that mindset that you talked about, do you think that the way that the federal government contributed to the CARES Act – did you think that was the best way to handle the pandemic with furloughs and layoffs, or what were your thoughts on that?

[1:09:58] If you feel comfortable.

Lam: Sure. I try not to think about it that much, because it is affecting everybody. I think the government is doing its best to deal with the situation at the given time. Are there better solutions out there? I don't know. You could do it another way and the only way to find out is to go the other route and see what happens.

[1:10:28] I think that people need to go back to work. I think that the workforce can only do so much, and if we're giving out free money and so forth to help, that's great at the time, but people need to understand, there's only a certain time, and then they have to pick up for themselves so they can contribute to the society as well.

Riggenbach: What would you say was the most difficult experience for you? Normally I'd say during 2020, but as this pandemic has stretched now into 2022, I guess I'll just say your most difficult experience during 2020s.

Lam_Pat

[1:11:08]

Lam: That whole time? Again, seeing how it's affecting family members, seeing how it's affecting my work, the work that I love, and also seeing how it's affecting my girls. I think kids in schools, they need to have that social interaction, and having isolation and having to worry about wearing masks and so forth.

[1:11:30]

And the joy of just walking out and breathing good air, that's our right as human beings, to breathe air and not worry about being affected by the virus and seriously hurt by that. I think that's the biggest thing, and I wish it didn't happen, but it did. Were there other solutions that we could jump ahead to get a head start to prevent this?

[1:12:00]

Yes, but again, nobody knew how badly it would have gotten. So I wish it was different. I wish we didn't have to have this pandemic, but I think overall, everybody's doing the best they can in the given situation.

Riggenbach:

Have your views on the pandemic changed over time?

Lam:

You know, thank goodness for the vaccine.

[1:12:26]

Now that we're a lot more protected than we were before. Still, my view hasn't changed. I wish it never happened so we have a normal back for us. I miss the pre-pandemic time, where you could just travel and have fun and not worry about anything. So yeah, it's a bad thing overall for everyone. I just hope that everybody wises up and gets vaccinated, gets protected. And I hope this virus will go away soon for us.

[1:12:58]

Riggenbach:

You have seen every element of the pandemic, where it's hit. You've seen from the elderly and people who are very vulnerable, you've seen it with school age children, you've seen it in people during your age, at the state level. You've seen it everywhere. Do you have thoughts on who you think was hit the hardest?

Lam:

Yeah, the senior population. And the young population, for some reason, it affects our elders more.

[1:13:35]

And when they're affected, it affects their loved ones as well. So definitely I feel it really hard hit for our seniors who are I think the most vulnerable of the population, because their health has declined, their immune systems decline. So you get hit with that, it's a hard thing to face.

[1:13:58]

Lam_Pat

Riggenbach: Most definitely. And do you have a vision for I guess life as we know it, a vision for normalcy?

Lam: I think this will be over. I think our scientists and our doctors are working around the clock to get this resolved. But the unknown factor, unknown thing there is, what other virus is going to pop up now down the road, right?

[1:14:27] We can only deal with what we see. A few years ago, who would have thought that this would happen? This is right out of the movie. You see – you know, in the movies where the people quarantine the whole country and it spreads, and you see that right now in real life. So I don't know, I think overall, I think we should do our best to be kind to each other, to take care of each other and make sure that we have a safe environment for our elders, for our younger generation, and for their future generation as well.

[1:15:06]

Riggenbach: Do you think that the experience through this pandemic as we continue to go through it, do you think it's prepared the government and people in the United States and the world more for another possible pandemic?

Lam: Yeah, I think it's an eye opener for everyone, you know, that, okay, next time, we're not going to take any small event lightly.

[1:15:31] We're going to be prepared for it. So definitely we'll prepare for it because, again, live and learn, right? So I think the world is prepared. We'll be more ready for whatever happens next. And I hope so. I hope that will help us for the sake of our world and humanity, yeah.

[1:15:54]

Riggenbach: And you know, the question I always like to end with is, if you could say anything to yourself before the pandemic started, what would you say?

Lam: You know, I would say that continue to do the things that I like to. The people, stay with the passion that you have for it. You know, spend as much time as you can with your loved ones. I think that's the biggest thing, because I've seen people who lost a loved one due to the pandemic unexpectedly.

[1:16:29] I've known people that know families that are refusing to take the vaccine, and both the father and grandfather passed away within a month because of that refusal to be vaccinated. So time is short on earth, so you spend whatever you can with your loved ones and try to enjoy the time that you have with them, because you never know.

[1:16:59] So it does give me more appreciation to life, because I'm passing my middle age now. My time will be up eventually, right? You never know. I always try to tell myself, try to live every day like it's your last day. Try to appreciate

Lam_Pat

everything you have, especially with the people around you and the people that love you, and vice versa.

Riggenbach: Well said.

Lam: Thank you.

[1:17:27]

Riggenbach: Is there anything that you would like to add before we close?

Lam: Yeah, well, thank you for this opportunity to interview with you, and I appreciate you and appreciate Dr. [Depew] for the other interview as well. And it's always a privilege and a pleasure to be a part of such a wonderful institution. And I feel blessed and fortunate that you've asked me for this interview, and thank you very much for your time as well.

Riggenbach: Well, thank you. You took my line. Thank you for your time.

[1:17:57] I think your perspective is very important to the completeness of this project, so thank you very much, Patrick.

Riggenbach: You're very welcome.