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Amanda: Hello, today is Tuesday, November 2nd, 2021. My name is Amanda Riggerbach and I am the manager for the Tumultuous 2020 Oral History Project at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. I'm currently at the library in Springfield, Illinois, with Chris Butler, President of Butler Funeral Homes and Cremation Tribute Center. We're going to be talking about his experience throughout the COVID-19 pandemic for the Tumultuous 2020 Project. Hi, Chris. Thanks for being with us today.

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Chris: Hello, Amanda. It's good to be with you.

Amanda: So, we always like to start at the beginning. When, and where were you born?

Chris: I was born right here in Springfield, Illinois, not far from here at St. John's Hospital.

Amanda: Do you have any siblings?

Chris: I have two. Well, I have three older siblings. One died shortly after birth, but is part of the family. And then two older sisters. One lives in the Chicago area and one lives in the St. Louis area.

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Amanda: I assume, if you're a Springfield guy, you went to Springfield around here.

Chris: I'm sorry?

Amanda: I said Springfield twice. You're a Springfield guy, so you went to high school around here.

Chris: Yes, I did go to high school. I graduated in 1984 and was a graduate of Griffin High School, which is today's Sacred Heart Griffin High School.

Amanda: Cool. And where did you go to college?

Chris: I went to Springfield College in Illinois and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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and then on to mortuary school at Forest Park in St. Louis. I did attend classes through the summers and things, both at Lincoln Land Community College as well as Sangamon State at the time, which is now University of Illinois Springfield. So, got a good flavor for the local colleges as well.

Amanda: What do you think it is about Springfield that's kept you here?

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Chris: As a community, Springfield, I thought was, one, it was a great place to grow up and it was exciting to me to give a shot to working with my family and in our family business, which all did come to meet my expectations. Since that time, I think Springfield is still a great place to live. It's a great place

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to raise a family and I think that Springfield is doing its best to try to focus its attention on the future in terms of where do we go from here.

Amanda: Absolutely. And in our pre-interview we discussed that you originally didn't think that you were going to go the funeral home route.

Chris: My parents were always encouraging that if I wanted to explore the funeral service or

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working at the funeral home, that was an option. But they also encouraged me to go out and learn what my gifts might be to contribute elsewhere, what my interests might be, and so forth. So, it was not pre-determined, which I think sometimes people tend to think it might have been.

Amanda: Yeah, absolutely. And I think I remember you saying that you had wanted to go into politics at that point.

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Chris: Well, it was interesting, in high school, I don't remember the name of the test. Maybe it's not a test, an assessment of some sort. But it kind of asked you a series of questions and it would say, "Here's some avenues you may want to explore," I assume it was through our Guidance Counselor and so forth. The things that came up, certainly the political arena did, but ironically, also funeral service did show up. But I did have an interest in the political world.

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I guess when you grow up in the era of Vietnam and post-Vietnam and all that happened in the 70s and 80s, some of that might have been natural, I don't know. But as a kid I was pretty attuned to it. You think of other things, Watergate, there was just a lot of political stuff going on. And it had my interest and so, I followed things pretty closely. And I also had a paper route. So, every morning I was reading the headlines as I was folding

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papers and it just piqued me. And I studied it in college as part of my degree, but ultimately decided to follow the business path and funeral service.

Amanda: What was that moment like for you choosing the funeral service pathway?

Chris: Well, the moment of choosing funeral service was a period of time. I was in college and studying as part -- I had a liberal arts degree at the University

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of Illinois but was studying Business and Political Science and had a personal grief experience in that period, which kind of helped me to understand what grief was. I probably didn't even know what the word was and what it meant prior to that. And gave -- at that point -- thought, "Well, maybe there's something in our family business that

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I need to kind of explore further." So, when I concluded my time -- well, I started working more in my early college years -- I started working more at the funeral home as time became available, summers and holiday breaks and things like that. And really kind of took an interest from there. And once I graduated from the University of Illinois, I ultimately decided to work a year

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at the funeral home before going to mortuary school just to make sure that I would enjoy the work. Two, I enjoyed working with my family, and three, the community. And all three kind of fell in place and when I went to mortuary school, I just couldn't wait to get finished with mortuary school. But it was a good experience too. I had a - I went to a smaller program based on my selection process of visiting schools

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and I really liked the director of the program and ultimately it was a two-year program. Like I said, I couldn't wait to get back. Once I was back, you have a year's apprenticeship and then you're fully licensed. And the things that happened from there are just more career-oriented type things. But that's what it was like. So, it was kind of a process.

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Amanda: You always kind of had that end goal of working at Butler Funeral Homes. Was it called Butler Funeral Homes at that point?

Chris: At that point in time, we had - we were a single-location organization and the name of the organization was Kirlin-Egan & Butler Funeral Home. So, the Butler was added on in the early 70s while my dad and my uncle were partners in the firm.

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So, the firm originated in 1893 as Kirlin and Egan. Although a member of my family has been there since 1925.

Amanda: That's going to be a hundred years coming up.

Chris: A couple years, that's right.

Amanda: And I think you had mentioned also that it's five generations.

Chris: Five generations of ownership in the business. I'm the third generation of my family in the business, yes.

Amanda: That's very impressive. So, it was around, what year was it that you officially started working there?

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Chris: 1985 is kind of, you know - earlier than that I would have mowed yards and kind of helped deliver flowers and some things like that, but not on a regular basis. It was more 1985 when I started working and it was 1990 when I was back as a licensed apprentice and '91 -- I believe it was -- when I was fully licensed as a funeral director.

Amanda: I remember discussing in our pre-interview just the way that you described the process

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of helping people grieve was really intriguing. You know, you mentioned helping people mourn and celebrate life. What is it about Butler Funeral Homes that really exemplifies this?

Chris: Well, I mean, our purpose statement is very clear on what our mission is. Is that our purpose is to help people mourn the death of their loved one and celebrate their life with dignity and respect and with genuine care and concern for survivors.

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When I say that in one sentence, I say, "We help people say goodbye." But what I think the unique aspect is, is that the word mourn is in there. In

today's world, there can be an inclination towards moving towards the celebration part, which has always been a part of funeral service, always part of the funeral process. But typically, the celebration part comes at the end, not at the beginning, because there are some difficult

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realities, emotional, relational, and spiritual needs that need to be attended to in that process of celebration. So, what I think our organization has always been focused on is making sure that people are aware of those needs and providing them ways that will help a family attend to all those needs in a way that's right for them.

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It's a process of giving information to people, having options available to them, our organization investing in those options. Then once people make their decisions, making sure we invest, help, and help the families implement their decisions.

Amanda: Has that always kind of been the focus when your family has been in charge, or is that something that has been shifted under your leadership?

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How has that happened?

Chris: Well, I think, certainly, through the history of the organization, those values were always inherently there. I think the difference is that we live in an age of information, and to some degree misinformation. Therefore, I think today there is a lot more need to provide information to people so they

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can make decisions based on what's right for them. So, it's not a matter of in the past, people just kind of knew what they were going to do and it was, I don't want to say it was easier to implement, but it was probably easier for decisions to be made at that time. Today, you have to have individuals that can effectively communicate to people and

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talk with them about what the options are, what the benefits of the various options are. As I said earlier, then once the family makes a decision or individual makes a decision, honor and implement the plans.

Amanda: You purchased the business from your father in, was it 2002?

Chris: 2002 was when I -- yeah, purchased from my father in the mid - early to mid-90s.

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My uncle had retired and there was a purchase during that time as well.

Amanda: What was that like, becoming the head of this ship, per se?

Chris: It was probably, in my mind, anticlimactic. My dad had allowed me to manage the business in the mid 90s on. And so, he had - he didn't retire on the job, I'm not suggesting that,

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but he had certainly given me a lot of latitude and a lot of freedom to operate and with that, make mistakes as well as some achievements. So, that was a good process. On the day that we closed, we did the closing and then we went to lunch and things kind of just seemed very, very normal. It didn't seem that different, really.

Amanda: Well, that seems like a good sign that you were ready for the role.

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Chris: Probably, you know. Probably ready for the role, as much as I guess as anybody would be at that point. And I assume - well, you know, I don't assume, but I think my dad was ready as well. You know, a lifetime of work and a lot of changes. You know, change is so much more rapid today, even than it was 20-some years ago. But still, you know, after a lifetime of that,

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it's time - I think, a welcome change to have a different future.

Amanda: And you guys have grown quite a bit. I'm not quite sure on the dates on those, but I know you guys have Roseland Pet Cemetery. You have places in Chatham, and - is it Rochester as well?

Chris: New Berlin. So, yeah.

Amanda: New Berlin, okay.

Chris: Yeah, 2002, we were a single location, 2005, New Berlin - the Funeral Home of New Berlin joined our organization,

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2007, Roseland Memorial Park joined our organization. Then we added the Pet Cemetery after that. I can't recall exactly which year that was. Then 2015, Boardman-Smith Funeral Home, which is kind of known as the Lincoln Family Funeral Home, having served the Lincoln family and President Lincoln's funerals locally,

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2015, that joined our organization. And that's an organization that started in 1844. Then in 2018, the Funeral Home and Reception Center in Chatham joined our organization. Interestingly, Roseland has a connection, the Lincoln connection as well, in that -- or from a time perspective-- in that where Camp Butler National Cemetery is located today, and where Roseland Memorial Park are located today,

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That was all part of the Camp Butler Civil War training camp. So, where Roseland is located was the south training field of that Civil War training camp. Union soldiers would train for the war at that point. They would depart for the war from nearby Jimtown, which is today's Riverton. Periodically we see people out there with the metal detectors looking for mementos from that era.

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Amanda: Wow, that's very cool.

Chris: Yeah.

Amanda: How does it feel having all of these different organizations under one roof? I mean, that's a lot of growth. I mean, I assume that's all you, right?

Chris: Well, what we always like to think of in our organization is that we're all where we're at because of a lot of work of a lot of people through the history of the organization. And then, our obligation where we're at today is to make sure

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that we leave the organization - leave our seat and the organization in a better position than when we found it for those that will follow us. Because all of us occupy a seat in the organization today that will one day be occupied by somebody else. So, not all me, certainly. You know, I've got a great team of associates. I've got a great leadership group in the organization

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that without them, none of this would be, either have happened or be sustainable.

Amanda: What does a standard service look like at Butler in a pre-pandemic world?

Chris: In a pre-pandemic world? Well, you know, there are no standard ceremonies anymore. People have, as I mentioned earlier, a lot of different options in terms of what they're going to do,

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ceremony and so forth. But in general, when we think of visitations and funeral ceremonies and committal ceremonies, you have a picture of a lot of people coming together. Again, if we think of that - attending to those important needs, emotional, relational, and spiritual. You have the emotional aspect, is people coming together

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to attend to their immediate, probably the closer-knit group of people, you know, the immediate family, extended family, the folks I like to call the unrelated family, friends that are just as close as family, where they're having that important time of goodbye. And so, they gather together and so forth. Then the relational, is where you start to get the broader relationships, community, acquaintances, friends that are coming by the funeral home

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or wherever the location of the ceremony is taking place. And people coming together just to support those that are survivors. So, a lot of people coming together in a way of either honoring, remembering, supporting, depending on what their relationship role is. Then, of course, the committal ceremony is taking place wherever that would be, which could be a cemetery, you know -

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and for burial, could be interment at a cemetery after cremation, and it could be people having a place at home for placement of their loved one's remains, at least for the time, you know, at least for the time. So, very public, very public.

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Amanda: I assume, with all those people, it's not necessarily something that's spaced out, as we've come to be very used to in this day and age.



Chris: Yeah, the term “social distancing” and “six feet apart” was very unknown in that period. So, one of the things I’ve certainly learned over the course of time is that the world is a busy place, and the world doesn’t stop for a lot of things.

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Except, it does stop for when somebody dies. And people will do - they want to show up, they want to support the family, the survivors, and they want to mourn the loss of somebody if they’re of the closer relationship. So, the world does stop for that, and it continued to stop, even while the world was in pause. I guess 2020 was the first time that we’ve seen the world stop

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for anything beyond what I’m trying to describe here. But even during that pause, there was pretty much of a need for people to still find a way to connect during that difficult period of goodbye.

Amanda: Absolutely. And that is a great segue into my next question which is, what exactly would you say is the role of the funeral home and what makes them important? I mean, we’ve

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talked about it already, but, you know, what would you say?

Chris: Well, death doesn’t end - death ends a life, but it doesn’t end a relationship. And you have a lot of emotional events going on at the time of a death. One of the things we know is that as people first learn of a death the most common response is, “I can’t

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believe they’re gone.” And that is true whether somebody knew the death was going to occur or whether it was sudden. I’ve seen families that have known for a period of time that somebody is going to die. Obviously, we know we’re all going to die. But when somebody has an imminent illness and death is anticipated, the reality is that the anticipation of a

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death and the learning of a death are two completely different emotional experiences. No one’s prepared for it. So, when we experience that, we transition to seeking support. We share the news, and we typically share the news with somebody that’s either the most proximate to us in physical location or proximate to us in terms of the

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closeness of our relationship. Obviously, in today's world, with technology, it is easy to reach out to people no matter where they're at through phone, text, Zoom type thing. And as we share the news, we begin to understand and comprehend that, you know, "Something significant in my life has happened, but maybe not everything has changed. And maybe I'll be okay, but it's

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going to be rough. It's going to be hard." As we share that news, then the question in that period is, "Well, when are services going to be?" You know, what people are really asking in that step is - in that question is, "Hey, when can I come see you?" "When can I come show up and support you?" And that's what people want to do. I just experienced it over the course of this last weekend in a profound way. A longtime classmate and friend of mine,

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probably my best bud in high school, died. So, people came from all over. Classmates from when we were in grade school were there, as well as all the people that he's touched in this community in his lifetime. And over the course of Friday and Saturday and even Sunday, people were saying goodbye. That was helpful for the family, but it was also

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helpful for everybody who was touched by his life and his death. So, that's what funerals achieve. I've seen it through my whole career. I've seen it several times personally this year. And I walk away noting how important it was, how beautiful it was. Then I ask

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myself the question, "What if none of that would have ever taken place? How much hurt would be left in the world?" And it doesn't mean that when the funeral is over that we're all healed and we're all - but it's a step. It's a step towards a new beginning and towards a good beginning and towards a healthy grief experience. Whereas if it didn't occur, all that untouched hurt is going to find a way to manifest itself some way, and maybe not

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in a healthy way. So, there's a lot of aspects to what the value of ceremony can do. Now, that's just through looking at it from a condensed -- in my opinion, condensed -- view because there's also all the attributes of

ceremony that allow people to connect with each other, to have time of reflection, and ultimately that time of celebration that we hear about.

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Always appropriate to celebrate alive. But that mourning that I talked about earlier is the aspect of being an active participant in the process of loss. We can't go around the hurt and expect that it's going to go away if we just move to an immediate celebration. Celebrations are important and they should be incorporated. But my perspective is that

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we also need to incorporate the challenging parts of it. I've always said in my community presentations at our Lunch and Learns and so forth that bodybuilders understand the premise of no pain, no gain. You've got to go through the hard part to have the benefit. And that's true in the period of loss as well.

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Amanda: For one, I'm so sorry for your loss. Do you guys offer more community outreach? You mentioned doing Lunch and Talk?

Chris: Yeah. So, we have a variety of community education programs on a variety of topics. They have different scopes and so forth. Our Lunch and Learn is what we call our open door session. We have another version called the Peace of Mind seminar. We touch on, you know, just basic information.

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We really try to have it more where people can ask questions. But we have upcoming in November, our Holiday Help Program, which we've hosted since 1991. That's where we bring in a grief specialist and we invite people in just to get information about - because we know at this time of year people are going to anticipate having difficulty with the holidays. I was at the grocery store on Halloween -- I think it was -- and I was going to pick up some Halloween candy extra,

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just in case. Of course, the Halloween candy is gone and it was replaced with Christmas candy. I just kind of got a chuckle about that. But I also thought in the back of my mind, "That's what causes people at this time of year to start thinking, 'I've had a loss this year. Oh my gosh, I'm not ready for the holidays. I don't want to go through the holidays. I don't want to experience the holidays.'" This is why our program originated all those years ago. It's

one of the most important things that grieving people can do is get information.

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Hopefully that's good information because as I said earlier, in today's world you can get a lot of information but you can also get a lot of misinformation. So, we bring in a grief specialist. We invite people through a variety of ways. The whole community is invited. It's not just people that we've served through our organization. And we give practical information, not only about the holidays but also on other significant days. It's not just the holidays that can be difficult for people. It can be days that are birthdays, anniversaries,

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significant days for whatever that may be in an individual's life. A lot of things can touch off that grief in people. Even, they could be walking through a store and smell the cologne or the perfume of the person that they've had to say goodbye to and it reminds them. And they think that, "Oh my gosh, I thought I was doing well, and here I am now, I'm just flooded with that

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emotion. I've got a friend who's a grief counselor. He runs the Center for Loss and Life Transition. He's a friend and somebody I consider a mentor, Dr. Alan Wolfelt. He says, "If you're experiencing that, you're doing well." He said, "If you're not feeling anything, is if you're not doing well." He said, "It's nothing wrong. You're not going crazy if you're flooded with emotions because you've smelled that perfume or that cologne." He said, "That's very, very natural."

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But then he goes on to explain further, the trouble signs and things like that. But there's a lot of things that can trigger that. So, that's another program that we have. We have different programs that we do. Just part of the organizational mission.

Amanda: I can definitely see that. Now I'm starting to shift the interview towards -- specifically -- 2020 and the uncertainty that was brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. We always like

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to start with that early part of 2020. Did you guys have any new year's resolutions or goals on a personal level and for the Butler Funeral Homes?

Chris: Well, yeah. Every year you set out what your goals are and so forth. That can be personal and it can be professional. Every year we recap at the end of the year what our accomplishments were. Honestly - and organizationally, what we always - when we have our end of year holiday party and

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recognition event, to me the most significant accomplishments are being able to read the thank yous that we get from families, whether that be through the different services that we offer. But then, yeah, you set your goals out and you just start working towards those goals and you communicate those within the organization. You set your leadership on projects and you

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get going for the year. So, by the time you hit March, you're on your way, right? At least you think you are, until 2020.

Amanda: Yes. Honestly.

Chris: But truthfully, now that I mention that, you know, there was rumblings. And I can't remember at what point, but it was certainly in February -- as I recall, that, "Hey, there's something going on that you need to pay attention to as an organization." I remember having discussions

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with our Director of Operations and with an outside consultant on, "Hey, what do you think is going to happen here?" But we had no true idea about what was coming at us.

Amanda: That seems to really be the consensus most people have experienced. I mean, January 30th was when the World Health Organization declared COVID a pandemic of - a public health emergency. And then it wasn't until, let's see, March 11th when they declared COVID-19 a pandemic.

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So, I mean, there was a lot of time between that and then between March 20th when the stay-at-home order came from the governor's office in Illinois. I mean, there's a lot of time of unknown and uncertainty. How did you guys initially respond? Was it March 20th when you guys - did you guys have to work from home then?

Chris: Well, that's interesting. I do recall - and in my mind, I don't remember specifically

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the dates, although I know that it was around St. Patrick's Day. And some of that relates to what goes on at our kids' school every year and things like that. We have family over, typically, on the weekend prior to St. Patrick's Day and maybe on St. Patrick's Day -- depending on if it's on a weekend or not -- for corned beef and cabbage and things like that. I do remember, though, that it was a Friday when we learned that on Monday or Tuesday

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or whatever the following week, it was going to be the stay-at-home. But we had kind of been preparing for that a little bit. Not that we knew exactly what was going on or what was happening. But it was interesting that when I started learning of things, that I searched my computer with the word "pandemic" and found a lot of information from one of our associations from the mid-2000s,

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as I recall, and maybe it was after that period. But anyway, it was, "How to Prepare for a Pandemic". I mean, I was looking through that information, I said, "Well, that's kind of amazing." There were other thoughts that we might enter a pandemic in the past. Not all the information was relevant, but it was certainly pertinent. So, you look through that as we prepared for stay-at-home. Stay-at-home doesn't work in our world.

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It was, all right, if everybody has to adhere to different aspects of things, one, who do we have in the organization that could work at home if they needed to? Which is very few. But two, how do we transition our offices to accommodate families, to accommodate our associates? And things like that. So, we essentially -- you had to develop a plan for your internal plan and communication.

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You had to develop a plan for your external plan and communication. And of course, websites and things like that help with that. All I remember is that, one, that it was a fire hose of information coming at us every day. And two, that I remember -- and this to a degree still exists, but I mean, not nearly like it was, but it was -- wow, if we could have put all this organizational effort into some other initiative,

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wow, how transforming would that have been. But what we were trying to do is just keep everything going, right. So, our plan was essentially saying, "Well, we've got these different locations. We're just going to have to spread people out so that we don't have congested work areas and things like that, and figure out a plan." And we did that. We implemented that, and figured out how we were going to meet with families,

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how were we going to do ceremonies, things like that. And we had to learn, you know, all right, what were the limits, and how did the limits work. There was consultations with - whether - typically, most of those consultations -- as I recall -- took place with our local health department as a conduit from the information that they were getting from the state and so forth. And you met with families.

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We certainly ramped up our technology to allow for remote conferences if people chose. Most people didn't want to do that. Most people said, "No, here's our two family representatives." Luckily, all our areas were large enough to accommodate plenty of what I like to call the "physical distancing and not the social distancing."

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Then we figured out how to effectively offer that time of goodbye at the different capacity limits that were offered to the period. At times it was - when it was 10, you had 10 people, and then you would cycle out and get a new 10 people in, and things like that. We had some interesting - we had people that were creative, not in a subversive way.

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They were just creative about, "Hey, this is important for us to do this, so how can we do it?" To me, the bigger challenge was not visitations but with ceremonies, because those were definitely - a ceremony - a visitation you can have over several hours, but ceremonies are - they're a one-time period. And you're limited on how many people you can have there, whether it's 10, 25, 50, or whatever the larger number might be.

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And of course, that was going to depend on location too. There was different limits depending on if you were a church or a physical location like our funeral home. So, you know, you just - we tend to call it streaming, not

necessarily live streaming, because sometimes it wasn't live, it was recorded, but most of the time it was a live stream.

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But that allowed people, at least, to have visitors that maybe not be right there with them, but they were able to attend and hear the ceremony and hear the eulogy and things like that. I know I attended a number of ceremonies that way of people that I knew.

Amanda: Was there a lot of pushback from people who perhaps wanted to do something more in person but weren't able to?

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Chris: I don't think pushback so much. I think it was, "Hey, we understand the limits, but how can we do something?" So, what I think we saw was - what I can recall is that - I'll give you just a couple examples just to kind of speak to the larger scenario of what we experienced was that

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in one instance there was a younger couple, and so, the wife had died and the family said, you know, "It's really important to us to have a visitation. We understand that there are limits on what you can do in terms of the number of people, but how can we do it?" So, what ultimately happened, they said, "If that's the limit of the number of people we can have, you guys figure it out, but we're going to be in here.

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This is who in our family will be here, so that's that count. And just transition people in and out of the building. Everybody else can wait outside." And we did that a number of times. During the colder months, people would stay in their cars and they'd get a number to, hey, you're next and that type of thing. You always got to get people in the order that they arrive, so that's important. But I just remember going to one particular visitation and I got there and we knew it was going to be larger and there was a lot of people out in the parking lot, but they had - you know, they were kind of congregating behind their cars.

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And they had the trunks open and they had lawn chairs out and I knew some of the people, so I just asked them, I said, "Hey, what are you guys doing?" And they said, "Well, we know there's going to be a lot of people here, and so we're just - we're waiting our turn. But even when we're done visiting with



the family, we all knew her and to us, it's important for us to visit with each other. And so, we're going to hang out here." I thought that was a real testament to what happens in a non-pandemic time.

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That's what people do. They connect and they support. And that was a great example of what people were doing. I think of another instance where an individual was an important part of a local faith congregation. They said, you know, "We can't have what we want to do there today, but we - that's where we would be. So, one, we're going to schedule something at an unknown time in the future and we're going to have a ceremony there," which they ultimately did.

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But they said, "In the meantime, we're going to - we want to have a procession to that parking lot. And we want you to advise that community that we're going to be there at this time. And for anybody who wants to acknowledge us as we go by, just tell them to park in the parking lot." And that's what happened. We had people call and say, "Hey, what's the processional route going to be for this individual as you go to the cemetery?"

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Then we'd find cars lined up along the processional route. You know, people were - they understand the importance of it. Some of it is to help with their own need and some of it is simply a show of support for those who experienced a loss. We had a number of families that said, "We're going to wait." Most did something, but some wanted to wait. And I'm proud of my team who kept in touch with those families.

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I'm proud that so many of the people ultimately did something, even a time removed. My perspective has always been that the time to do something is at the time of death, not a time in the future, because a lot of times it doesn't happen. But in this regard, people held on to it and they did it. And again, not everybody, but a lot did. I attended some of those ceremonies. They were well attended.

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They were as emotionally rewarding and helpful, beneficial for those people. I think in some instances maybe more because they were holding on to some hurt that wasn't able to be released in a way that was meaningful to them

earlier. So, a very interesting period of time to watch and to be a part of. As many people say, you're living through history, so we lived through it.

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As I think back -- I didn't mention this organizationally -- but members of -- I believe it was the Kirlin family -- died in the flu epidemic, of the 18 to 20. It was a two-year period, right? And they were in the latter period of it. So, organizationally, we've been through it and touched by it. And here we are this time and really had a very safe run through it.

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Our team's done very, very well. We didn't work from home. I'm very proud that we had less part-time people working just because there weren't the events, so to speak, to work. But we didn't have anybody say, "I am not available," through the whole period. That's pretty impressive. And I'm grateful for that.

Amanda: How do you think people's experience with grief was shaped by the pandemic?

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Chris: Well, what I witnessed was a lot of stories on the national media talking about how hard it is to lose a loved one when it's a pandemic period. And to me, it was kind of like they were taking the blinders off of the value of ceremony that maybe in the past, the articles wouldn't have been focused in on the benefit.

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They would be focused in on other things trying to diminish the value of what takes place through the ceremonial process. I didn't really see a lot of that. I saw a lot of articles saying, hey, this is important to do. It's just one of those things, when you can't have it, you kind of start to value it. And so, I think that really helped in that process.

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Now, obviously, any solutions that you come up with during a period like this, they're not always going to be perfect. And it's such an individual process anyway. So, you really had to work to find an acceptable solution for individuals and individual families.

Amanda: We were just discussing the value of ceremony and you know how that was

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amplified through not having it. Do you find that the streaming -- whether live or not -- did that seem to have an impact on people in a similar sense if it was - if they were in person or - I mean, obviously, I think everyone has to agree that in person it's better but, was it a similar cathartic experience perhaps?

Chris: It's a good question. And maybe not one that I would be fully versed on. I mean, certainly I --

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personally I -- remember a friend of mine his wife died. I knew them both. And in this situation, it was during the period where only ten people could be at the ceremony. And I said, "You know, just to keep the number of people down, I won't attend." Now this was even at -- this was a church but even at -- this was before churches had a opportunity to have a larger gathering. But

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I remember viewing it, attending through viewing, and thinking I wish I was there. But then I got to hear what he said in his eulogy, and it was such beautiful remarks. So, I said, "Wow." One, part of the value that was achieved there is that he elected to have the ceremony because

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he knew it could be streamed. So, if the streaming hadn't taken place, would they have had that? Would he have taken the time to write those words? Writing the words and preparing is healing for him. Hearing the words amongst the family is going to be an aid towards healing for them and

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for those of a close relationship that heard him. So, I thought to myself, I was like, "Wow, I'm so glad that I was able to participate and hear that." At the same time, I was like, "Wow, I wish I was there to give him a hug." Yeah. And certainly, very clear to me was how natural it is for people to hug, embrace, laugh, cry, all those things that are beautiful human moments.

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How important that is and how natural that is for that to occur when people are in person. So, from that perspective, I understood the idea that we're going to limit attendance until we know a little bit more. And, you know, I guess in that process I was also mourning the fact that some of that wasn't taking place. So, was it good that I - and I'm sort of using myself as an example of what others would have done.

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Yeah, it was great that we could participate in that way. It was great for the family. It was great for us. But it wasn't ideal. I guess, when you can't achieve what you want, what's the next best thing? So, technology has certainly aided in that process. But it wasn't perfect.

Amanda: With the changing of seasons, and, you know, in May of 2020, Illinois moved to Phase 2,

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I think, which allowed a little bit more leeway with rooms. And with that warmer weather, did you guys do anything outdoors? Did families request that?

Chris: We didn't have a lot of requests for it. You know, it was interesting. It was an interesting period. There was a lot of relief. Certainly, not just in our world, but all over. Really, all over the community,

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of being able to open up a little bit. You know, thinking about restaurants being able to have patrons on site, maybe outdoors at that time, I can't recall the timeline. But I remember going to a restaurant for the first time in a couple months, and we were outdoors. It was on a parking lot, under a tent. And I was like, "I never thought I'd be so excited to be out on a parking lot having dinner at a restaurant," but it was really nice.

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So, yeah, we had outdoor events, you know, where people would say, we're going to be comfortable with doing something at the cemetery or wherever the event. You know, we've always - I mean, we've had outdoor events before at different locations, but I don't think that we saw a large increase in outdoor events. I think people were comfortable coming to the facility. We had it very clearly marked, and we had everything set up. Seats were farther apart,

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we had steps where you could go to keep apart. And people kind of just knew the drill. I think the other aspect of things was that there were people that were not comfortable attending. So, whereas a gathering in the past may have been extra large, it was large. And where it would have been large, it was medium. And where it would have been medium, it was small, to that degree. That was the effect that it had.

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I think as we've moved forward to where we're at today, people are behaving differently, and you see larger crowds again.

Amanda: Yeah, and, you know, I've been kind of going chronologically, but it was in the end of 2020, December 15th was when the first vaccines became available to health care workers, long-term care facilities staff and residents. And then by April of 2021,

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the vaccine was available to all Illinoisans age 16 and up. And that kind of led this time where things began opening up. It was in June that Illinois moved to Phase 5, which was basically reopening. Did that- is that kind of when a lot of people started doing the ceremonies that they had put off, or did that happen late before?

Chris: You're talking about June of this year, 2021?

Amanda: Yes. Yes.

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Okay, yeah. I think in our area - the pandemic effect hit different parts of the country at different times of the year. I have friends that are in funeral service in New York and Denver and so forth, and some of what they were experiencing earlier in the year was really, to me, was mind-boggling.

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But we didn't have that here until we saw at the end of November- or in November and December was where, of course, the state moved back, and it was stronger mitigation efforts and things like that. That was a darker period, and people were at a heightened sense of awareness of things.

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Then as we- I think as the vaccine was available, and obviously, we don't dig into that controversy here, but we recognize that there's always going to be that controversy of that. But it was embraced by a large number of people, I think. And I think there was a level of comfort, really, kind of relatively, amazingly quick. Really, when you look into January,

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even the state allowed crowd numbers to increase. Even though it was slight, but it was an increase as early as January, as I recall. But anyhow, as

the year went on, yeah, I think there was more comfort level. And as June- I would say it was anywhere from March to June that people started saying, you know, "We're ready to schedule."

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They were always looking at, what's that number? And so, yeah, naturally, I think that number was in June, where they said, "Yeah, we're ready to do something." You know, I saw some large ceremonies in the summertime, delayed ceremonies. And kind of amazing, really, when you think about it. But it's been a transition, and where we're at today is, you know, still-

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well, there's different perspectives on where we're at today. But I think, for the most part, people really kind of want things to be, as much as they can, normal. Yeah.

Amanda: Absolutely. And that does bring us to the end of our first session of our interview, and that kind of timeless, perfect ending point for the time. So thank you so much for your time, Chris. It's been a great first half of the interview.

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Oh, I'm grateful to be here. And it's been helpful for me to kind of recount the experience and have perspective on it. It's interesting, you know, as I think of that - earlier we discussed that March 20th, and I remember driving in to the office and there was nobody out.

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My kids were staying home, my wife was staying home, and they were going to do remote. And I showed up at my office, and the streets were empty. It was that way for - it was pretty eerie. And where I'm at today, you know, downtown Springfield, I remember driving by this building and through downtown and you expected to see a tumbleweed more than a person, and that was sad. It was kind of heartbreaking to me. As we all know, there's going to be a lot of effect moving forward.

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The effect of the pandemic was obviously immediate through the experience of what we all just went through. And now we're going to see the other effects, kind of the unknown effects that kind of evolve, the trends and so forth that come out of it. That's going to be a learning experience for all of us

as well. Some of it's going to be hard, and some of it's going to be beneficial. We'll just see where it goes.

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Amanda: And if your experiences have taught me anything, just hearing about them, is that people are resilient...

Chris: Oh, yeah.

Amanda: ...through it all.

Chris: Yeah, you know, that's a great point. The resiliency of human beings is amazing. And boy, when I think about some of the tragedy that was experienced with some families that - I mean, it's always a tragedy when you lose somebody in your family.

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But I saw families that had multiple losses during this period. And wow, I mean, you know, that's amazing. But yet, you know, you see them, and they're carrying on. Again, not that they're healed, and not that they're not hurting, because you carry that. But, you know, they continue on with their lives, and they strive.

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That resiliency factor that you mentioned is pretty darn amazing, the human spirit.

Amanda: Absolutely. And what a great way to end the...

Chris: Yeah.

Amanda: ... our first session. Especially, given the heaviness of the pandemic. So, thank you again.

Chris: Thank you.

Amanda: And thank you, to the listener. You'll hear the second half of this interview soon.