



Season 1 | Episode 1 | Shutdown

World Health Organization General: We have formed the assessment that COVID-19 can be characterized as a pandemic.

TV News Reporter: Breaking news tonight, the coronavirus outbreak declared a global pandemic.

Donald Trump: This is a global pandemic.

TV News Reporter II: Tonight, we'll take on the urgent questions here at home and around the world.

Lawrence Schovanec, President, Texas Tech University: This is a very difficult time for everyone involved.”

Lori Rice-Spearman, President, Texas Tech Health Sciences Center: Our leadership team has made a decision to suspend on campus classes.

Schovanec: Now, we understand this will have an impact...

Tedd Mitchell, Chancellor, Texas Tech University System: When something is going on within our system, it impacts everybody.

(Music)

Taylor Peters, Host: FROM TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY, WE BRING YOU FEARLESS. A PODCAST FEATURING THE UNTOLD STORIES OF THE SCHOOL WE LOVE SO DEARLY. IN SEASON ONE, YOU'LL HEAR FROM STUDENTS, FACULTY AND STAFF – HOW THEY PURSUED AND FOUND SUCCESS DESPITE THE CHALLENGES THAT FOREVER CHANGED US ALL. IT'S THE STORIES YOU'VE NEVER HEARD FROM THE DECISION-MAKERS...

Schovanec: We had no playbook; we were making these decisions in real time fully recognizing there were not perfect answers.

Peters: THOSE WHOSE FUTURES SEEMED MOST UNCERTAIN...

Student: Last year I was robbed for the most part.

Peters: AND EVERYONE IN BETWEEN. WE PULL BACK THE CURTAIN OF COVID AND LOOK AT THE TRANSFORMATIONS THAT TOOK PLACE ON THE TEXAS TECH CAMPUS DURING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC. FROM THE TRIALS TO THE TRIUMPHS. A COMMUNITY THAT NEVER STOPPED BELIEVING IT'S POSSIBLE.

(Instrumental Music)

Peters: THIS IS EPISODE ONE- SHUTDOWN

(Walking sounds)

Peters: IF YOU WALK AROUND CAMPUS TODAY, IT'S HARD TO EVEN PICTURE WHAT LIFE WAS LIKE JUST 17 MONTHS AGO.

(Bus Passing)

Peters: WE'RE INCHING CLOSER TO THAT LIFE BEFORE COVID... BUT WE STILL HAVE A WAYS TO GO. WITH THIS NEW DELTA VARIANT, COVID IS LINGERING. WE'RE CAUTIOUSLY OPTIMISTIC, STILL DOING WHAT WE CAN. BUT IT'S ENCOURAGING TO SEE STUDENTS BACK ON CAMPUS. AND THEY'RE HAPPY TO BE HERE, TOO. THIS LOOKS AND FEELS LIKE LIFE BEFORE COVID... OR CLOSE ENOUGH AT LEAST. I PASS BY A FEW, HEADING FOR IN-PERSON CLASSES. OR HEAR SOCIAL CLUBS MEETING TOGETHER IN THE SUB.

(Birds Chirping)

Peters: EVEN THE BIRDS SEEM LIKE THEMSELVES AGAIN. BEFORE THE REIGN OF COVID PROTOCOLS AND RESTRICTIONS. BEFORE THE VIRUS CHANGED HOW WE LIVED OUR LIVES.

(Music)

Jay Hitt, Student: I think the best word to describe it was that it was a dream, honestly.

Peters: I HARDLY THINK THAT GOOGLING PICTURES OF SEVILLE SPAIN CAN TRULY DO IT JUSTICE. BUT IT DOES HELP PAINT A PICTURE. I IMAGINE A BUSTLING CITY, WHERE TOURISTS ROAM THE STREETS YEAR-ROUND, INDULGING IN THE AUTHENTIC SPANISH CULTURE. IT'S ANY COLLEGE STUDENT'S DREAM SPOT FOR STUDY ABROAD. IT WAS FOR JAY HITT, AT LEAST.

Hitt: The days good. They were like really good because our only job was to learn Spanish. There was definitely a motivation to study hard..

Peters: WHEN WE SAT DOWN WITH EVERYONE FOR THIS EPISODE, THEIR THOUGHTS AND STORIES OF THOSE FIRST FEW DAYS ARE THE SAME. THE FIRST CONVERSATION... THE FIRST PIVOTAL DECISION INVOLVING STUDY ABROAD, AND HOW TO BRING HOME JAY, ALONG WITH THE OTHER 108 STUDENTS WHO WERE STUDYING ABROAD.

Allison Hirth: Is it okay if we go back to your office?

Peters: I'm Taylor.

Whitney Longnecker, Director, Study Abroad: Hi, I'm Whitney.

Peters: It's nice to meet you, Whitney.

Peters: WHITNEY LONGNECKER IS THE DIRECTOR OF STUDY ABROAD AT TEXAS TECH. SHE AND HER TEAM WERE PAYING CLOSE ATTENTION TO THE GROWING CONCERNS OF CORONAVIRUS LEADING UP TO THE SPRING OF 2020. PROGRAMS IN CHINA AND SOUTH KOREA HAD ALREADY BEEN CANCELED BECAUSE OF THE RAPID SPREAD OF THE VIRUS ACROSS ASIA.

Longnecker: "When the coronavirus got to Italy is when everyone really sat up, at the university in general but within study abroad and said, 'Okay this is a big deal'."

Peters: ITALY, SPAIN AND THE UK ARE THE TOP THREE STUDY ABROAD LOCATIONS FOR TEXAS TECH STUDENTS. IN FACT, NEARLY HALF OF ALL STUDENTS WHO STUDY ABROAD CHOOSE ONE OF THOSE THREE LOCATIONS.

(People Talking in Meeting)

Peters: WHITNEY WAS ATTENDING A CONFERENCE FOR INTERNATIONAL EDUCATORS IN COLLEGE STATION.

Longnecker: I was literally sitting in a room with a bunch of other folks who are in positions very similar or exactly the same to mine. I was in a session focused on the coronavirus and the response and universities were sharing best practices of what they were doing and all of this kind of thing... And literally at the same moment everyone's phones started buzzing and dinging and that was the news that the state department raising the travel advisory for Italy. Everyone found out about it at the same time. You could just hear the groan throughout the room like 'oh my gosh this is real'.

Peters: THAT DAY, THE STATE DEPARTMENT HAD ISSUED A GLOBAL LEVEL 4 TRAVEL ADVISORY- THE MOST SEVERE WARNING. ADVISORIES LIKE THESE ARE RESERVED FOR WAR ZONES.

Hitt: It might have been early march when COVID made its way into Europe. I remember watching the first week of march it initially strike in Italy, watching the Italian healthcare system break down.

Peters: JAY WAS WATCHING THIS SAGA PLAY OUT IN REAL TIME- HE WAS TUNING INTO NEWS COVERAGE EVERY DAY WITH GROWING DREAD AND SHOCK.

Hitt: The news coverage was focused on Italy, and it was honestly kind of scary just watching the healthcare system that was not prepared get blitzed. Just watch the death and sadness and destruction. At that point it wasn't a matter of if but when.

Schovanec: Okay. My name is Lawrence Schovanec and serve as President of Texas Tech University. Many times, you would be having conversations and people would say 'can you believe this is happening?' Of course, we had doubts, but I would be on the phone at twelve o'clock at night, one o'clock in the morning, calling Noel Sloan, people in operations, talking to the chief of staff weighing the various issues we were dealing with. Sometimes, and this won't be too reassuring to some people listening, we had to fly by the seat of our pants.

Longnecker: I will say that was a very chaotic moment because there had never been a global level 4 before. This was a totally new scenario for the United States and the department of state to announce.

Dan Pope, Lubbock Mayor: On Friday, I got a phone call that next day I get a call...

Peters: THIS IS LUBBOCK MAYOR DAN POPE.

Pope: "...I think it was Kendra Burress, in the chancellor's office, she's a deputy chancellor. And she said, 'Hey can you get your folks together. We need to brainstorm with you guys. We are trying to get our study abroad kids home. We have some ideas, but we may need a little help. So, we spent that Friday, that's the Friday before spring break.

Schovanec: We thought, well we're going to stop face-to-face instruction and, we'll make a decision after spring break. But very quickly realized that we were in it in a much more serious way.

(News reports about international travel)

Reporter: In a dramatic move to stop the spread of coronavirus, President Trump has ordered an extensive travel ban.

Reporter II: Dr. Anthony Fauci offered a grim prediction on Wednesday, warning of more cases to come.

Anthony Fauci, Director, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases: We've got to assume that it's going to get worse and worse and worse.

Peters: JAY AND THE OTHER STUDENTS SCRAMBLED TO GET FLIGHTS. THE UNIVERSITY HAD ALREADY PROMISED TO REIMBURSE THEM WHEN THEY GOT HOME. JAY TOLD US ABOUT THE STUDENTS RETURN HOME EXPERIENCE, TOO. HE SAID IT WAS WEIRD. AND ALARMING.

Hitt: We were kind of concerned that the airports would shut down at any moment, we didn't really know. So, it was like another layer of like 'we gotta get out of there' so we booked the earliest flight that we could.

Peters: HE HAD JUST SEEN WHAT COVID WAS CAPABLE OF- HE HAD WATCHED IT RAVAGE THROUGH A COUNTRY AND HE WAS SCARED OF WHAT IT MAY DO.

Hitt: In DFW it was like nothing had happened, which was really, really spooky. So, I was just sitting there, and it hit me, just tears running down my face thinking like they don't get it, it's too late.

(Music)

Peters: THE STUDENT'S RETURN TO NORMAL LIFE WOULD BE ANYTHING BUT... THE END OF A STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCE WAS JUST THE BEGINNING. AND IT WOULDN'T TAKE LONG FOR THE CAMPUS TO MAKE A DRASTIC TRANSFORMATION.

Schovanec: From a university that was teaching 40,000 students, a great majority of the courses face-to-face... to waking up one day and not one course was meeting for face-to-face instruction. You'd come on campus and parking lots are empty, students evacuating dorms. It was an eerie feeling.

Pope: You mention eerie... It was dead. I live by campus, so I jog on campus, and it was like a Sunday morning during Christmas break when it's really dead, but it was like that every morning.

Peters: THOUSANDS OF STUDENTS MADE A SWIFT AND UNEXPECTED EXIT FROM CAMPUS. BUT THERE WERE SOME WHO HAD NOWHERE ELSE TO GO- 437 STUDENTS STAYED ON CAMPUS FOR AT LEAST PART OF THAT SPRING SEMESTER AFTER THE CAMPUS CLOSED. SOME OF THESE WERE COMMUNITY ADVISORS, OR CA'S. JAY LIVES WITH HIS DAD AND STEPMOM HERE IN LUBBOCK- HE WENT TO CORONADO HIGH SCHOOL, BY THE WAY. HIS STEPMOM WORKS IN A NURSING HOME, AND JAY HAD SEEN HOW DANGEROUS THE VIRUS WAS IN THE ELDERLY POPULATION.

Hitt: In those two weeks I just needed to breathe. And not really see or talk to anyone, there was just such a wide, such a large disconnect.

Peters: HE DID A LOT OF READING, AND THINKING. HE STARTED JOURNALING WHEN HE WAS IN SPAIN, AND HE READ SOME OF THE THINGS HE WROTE FOR US.

Hitt: That's exactly what I put- grieving the experience. I just needed space to process that. It was really sad. It was weird... really weird.

(Dan Pope Entering Room)

Pope: Sorry, I got caught up doing Mayor things.

Peters: That's okay. How are you?

Peters: DAN POPE HAS A LONG-STANDING LOVE FOR LUBBOCK. HE'S A SECOND-GENERATION TECH GRAD, AN EIGHT GENERATION TEXAN HE TELLS ME PROUDLY.

Pope: My dad used to joke that he would pay for college as long as we went to Tech. So, we are all Red Raiders.

Peters: HIS DAUGHTER IS A CURRENT STUDENT. AND AT HIS CORE, HE'S A BUSINESSMAN, HIS PLANS FOR DOWNTOWN RENOVATIONS AND MULTI-MILLION DOLLAR PROJECTS HAVE

CONTINUED TO BECOME A REALITY OVER THE LAST FIVE YEARS...SO, IT WASN'T JUST THE THOUGHT OF A FLOURISHING LUBBOCK ECONOMY BEING THREATENED... HE WORRIED ABOUT HIS CITY. HIS ALMA MATER. BUT MOST IMPORTANTLY, THE STUDENTS WHO ALSO CALL THIS PLACE HOME.

Pope: I've spoken at Tech orientation, every Tech orientation either live or via video for the last three or four summers and I promise parents that we'll take care of their kids. And uh... You know...

Peters: DAN DOESN'T HOLD BACK HERE. HE WEARS HIS EMOTIONS ON HIS SLEEVE, ESPECIALLY WHEN HE TALKS ABOUT HIS CITY. COVID TOOK A TOLL ON US ALL, INCLUDING OUR LEADERS.

Pope: But as a parent you realize how important they are to you, whether they're your kids or someone else's.

Longnecker: These are students but they're also someone's child, someone's brother and sister and all these things. It's more than a Texas Tech student, a Texas Tech Red Raider, they have a life beyond this, and we have a responsibility to help to keep them safe and healthy.

Schovanec: People are responding out of concern for their daughter, son, colleague, family member. What would you do to keep your family safe? And that truly did guide us. You're so caught up in the moment, you don't go home at night and feel sorry for yourself. You are just prepared for the next challenge the next day.

Peters: AND THE CHALLENGES WERE MOUNTING... NOT ONLY FOR THE PRESIDENT AND HIS STAFF. 12 MILES WEST OF CAMPUS, STEVE PRESLEY AND HIS TEAM WERE ON HIGH ALERT.

(GPS Navigation: "Turn left onto Boston Avenue, then turn right onto 19th street")

Peters: REESE TECHNOLOGY CENTER IS A SHORT DRIVE. THERE'S A GOLF COURSE AND A POLICE ACADEMY, AND SEVERAL BUILDINGS THAT ARE USED BY SOUTH PLAINS COLLEGE AND TEXAS TECH. IT WHERE STEVE'S OFFICE IS LOCATED AND WHERE HE CONDUCTS HIS RESEARCH.

Steve Presley, Director, The Institute of Environmental and Human Health: My name is Steve Presley and I'm a professor and the chair of the Department of Environmental Toxicology and the Director of The Institute of Environmental and Human Health. It's a mouthful.

Peters: STEVE IS TALL WITH A STRONG BUILD... HE WOULD BE INTIMIDATING IF HE WASN'T SO FRIENDLY...WHEN WE ARRIVED TO SPEAK WITH HIM FOR THIS PODCAST, HE GREETED US IN THE LOBBY.

Hirth: How has your day been?

Presley: Good, it's beautiful outside. I go on a walk just about every day.

Peters: HE WAS EAGER TO WELCOME US, TALKING ABOUT THE WEATHER, AND HOW NICE HIS WALK HAD BEEN AT LUNCH. AS IT TURNS OUT, THAT'S SOMETHING THAT HAS INCREDIBLE VALUE FOR STEVE. AND I'LL TELL YOU WHY HERE IN JUST A SECOND. BUT FIRST, IT'S IMPORTANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT THE BIOLOGICAL-THREAT RESEARCH LAB OR THE BTRL. IN PRE-COVID TIMES, STEVE AND HIS TEAM RESEARCH AND STUDY DISEASES LIKE EBOLA, WEST NILE VIRUS AND ZIKA. BUT IT BECAME CLEAR IN EARLY MARCH, THE LAB WOULD NEED TO SHIFT ITS FOCUS. SO, THE UNIVERSITY ALONG WITH TEXAS TECH HEALTH SCIENCES CENTER WORKED TOGETHER TO BECOME THE FIRST LAB IN STATE TO PROCESS AND TEST COVID-19 SAMPLES. IT WOULD STAY THAT WAY FOR A WEEK AND A HALF UNTIL OTHER LABS CAME ONLINE. HIS TEAM OF THREE WOULD GROW TO NEARLY 30, AND AT ITS

PEAK, THEY'D PROCESS AND TEST UP TO 600 SAMPLES A DAY – FROM MORE THAN 100 COUNTIES IN TEXAS, THREE IN OKLAHOMA AND SIX IN NEW MEXICO. AND IT WAS THIS TEAM WHO CONFIRMED THE FIRST POSITIVE TEST IN THE CITY.

(News Reports)

Anchor: "Now the Lubbock area has its first two cases."

Reporter: "Now, one of the people who tested positive is from Lubbock County, the other is from Hockley County."

Health Official for the City of Lubbock: "I received notification from our local response laboratory that we have two locally confirmed cases of Coronavirus."

Peters: STEVE SAID THAT WHEN THAT FIRST POSITIVE RESULT CAME THROUGH, IT WASN'T A SURPRISE HE HAD BEEN EXPECTING IT. IT WAS THE INEVITABLE COMING TO FRUITION. BUT WHAT HE DIDN'T EXPECT, WAS THE EMOTIONAL TOLL IT WOULD TAKE ON HIM AND HIS TEAM.

Presley: Where I'm headed with that is the hardest part for me... was the infants. The young kids, the birthdate is associated with every sample name. This one-month-old, this six-month-old. I think that got me as a grandparent, but it also got to some of my senior laboratorians that have kids right now. We know approximately the viremia, the amount of virus in the individual. I think that was one of the hardest... one of the hardest things. The other hard part was keeping morale up because people get tired.

Peters: THEY WERE FOCUSED ON THE TASK AT HAND. THE WORK THEY WERE DOING WAS IMPORTANT, AND HE FELT THE WEIGHT OF THAT.

Presley: People can only go so long, you can only go so long under stress and then it has to be vented in some way or you fall apart. And so, everyone figured out how to support each other.

(Door Squeaking)

Presley: I'll give you the grand tour, unless you're in a hurry.

Peters: AND IT WASN'T EASY WORK. HE SHOWED US AROUND THEIR FACILITY, WHERE THE TESTS HAD BEEN CONDUCTED- NOT INSIDE THE LAB, OF COURSE. BUT IT'S PROBABLY EXACTLY WHAT YOU'RE IMAGINING... IT WAS STERILE AND BRIGHT, FLUORESCENT LIGHTS AND WHITE TABLE TOPS, WHITE WALLS AND FLOORS. THE AIR FILTRATION CHAMBERS ARE BIG AND BOXY, LIKE AN INDUSTRIAL SIZE OVEN HOOD WITH A HUGE GLASS DOOR.

Presley: The lead is working and once you put your hands inside the BSC, you don't pull them out. So, you have a second that is handing you stuff to keep it from being contaminated.

Hirth: Kind of like a surgical tech or something?

Presley: Exactly like that. Exactly.

Peters: THE TEAMS WORKED IN 8 HOUR SHIFTS- MORNING AND NIGHT. AND STEVE PRESLEY WAS THERE FOR MOST OF IT.

Presley: About six hours is all anyone could do. So, we had to come up with means of decompression, it was high stress, really loud, because of air filtration, and your PPE. It's really interesting how people come together when pressure like that... I had a career in the military before I came to Tech and it's the same comradery. When you're under pressure and you're working hard. I'm very proud of my team, if you can't tell.

Peters: WE COULD TELL, STEVE MADE IT CLEAR HOW MUCH HE CARES FOR THAT GROUP OF PEOPLE. HE SAW THE TIME THEY WERE GIVING AND THE PART OF THEMSELVES THEY POURED INTO THEIR WORK. THAT PRIDE DIDN'T JUST BLOSSOM INSIDE THE LAB. IT GAINED MOMENTUM IN THE NEARLY 3 MILES OF PAVEMENT THAT SURROUNDS THE REESE CAMPUS. THE STRESS OF THE PANDEMIC WAS BECOMING HEAVY. AND SOMETIMES, THEY ALL JUST NEEDED A BREAK.

Presley: Toward the end of March, when we were just getting going good. I realized that I was up at 4:30 every morning. I got my stuff together and got out here so we could start receiving samples from hospitals and clinics at 7, until 7 pm. It's a 2.7-mile loop around Reese and every day at noon I started walking. Slowly more of my team started walking with me. So, there was a whole crew of us, and we collected golf balls, rain or shine, whether it was freezing, it didn't make any difference. We walked. Physical activity is a great stress reliever. Or is for me.

Peters: It's therapeutic.

Presley: It is. Truly.

(Music)

Peters: CLASSES REMAINED VIRTUAL THROUGH THE END OF THE SPRING SEMESTER. THE CAMPUS WAS CLOSED AND THE UNIVERSITY CHOSE TO REFUND A PORTION OF HOUSING AND CREDITED BACK DINING EXPENSES TO STUDENTS. IT WAS A DECISION WORTH ALMOST 10 MILLION DOLLARS. IT'S ESTIMATED THAT IN THE CALENDAR YEAR OF 2020, TEXAS TECH LOST AROUND 95 MILLION DOLLARS. THAT'S A NUMBER THAT IS CONTINUING TO GROW IN 2021. AS THE SUMMER MONTHS WORE ON, PRESIDENT SCHOVANEC WAS DETERMINED TO FIND A WAY FOR STUDENTS TO RETURN TO CAMPUS FOR THE FALL SEMESTER. HE TOLD US THAT TEXAS TECH WAS PART OF ROUGHLY 25% OF COLLEGE CAMPUSES ACROSS THE UNITED STATES THAT WERE FIGHTING TO ALLOW STUDENTS TO RETURN TO CAMPUS THE FOLLOWING AUGUST. BUT IT WASN'T ABOUT PUSHING TO GET BACK TO NORMAL... IT WAS ABOUT DEFENDING THE COLLEGE EXPERIENCE.

Schovanec: I would say that for many people, this has reinforced the need for social interaction. I've said this many times, people often choose a university because of the culture of that university, and that culture is based on its people.

Peters: AND WHITNEY LONGNECKER AGREES. COVID SHOWED US HOW IMPORTANT FACE TO FACE INTERACTION IS, AND HOW TRULY CONNECTED WE ARE.

Longnecker: I don't know what else would show us all the depth of this global world that we live in besides a global pandemic.

Schovanec: I would rather say 'what will never go away'. The need to build personal relationships. You don't make memories through technology. You make memories through your experiences with other people.

Peters: AFTER ALL, WE HAVE EACH SHARED LOSS. WHETHER OF A LOVED ONE, A CAREER WE WERE PROMISED, A FUTURE WE HAD WORKED FOR, OR OUR FINANCIAL SECURITY. EACH OF US CAN'T HELP BUT BE CHANGED BY WHAT WE SAW, HEARD, FELT.

Pope: I think we want to live in community, we want to be together. We want to go to ball games and the art festival, we want to go to the art trail, we want to cheer on our kids at high school football games. That stuff comes back, I really believe.

Peters: DAN POPE MAYBE SAID IT BEST. THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT THIS PLACE THAT SPEAKS TO US, THAT WE FEEL CONNECTED TO. THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT A WALK DOWNTOWN, OR DINNER WITH FRIENDS WATCHING A WEST TEXAS SUNSET, OR EVEN A GAMEDAY CHEERING ON THE HOME TEAM.

Pope: That's why we live in college towns.

Peters: IT AWAKENS OUR SPIRIT; IT GIVES US SOMETHING TO BELIEVE IN.

Pope: We set our clock to those things. I can't imagine a better place to be through the pandemic and today than Lubbock Texas....

(Music)

Peters: NEXT TIME ON FEARLESS, CONFUSION IN KANSAS CITY. WE DIVE INTO THE BREAKING POINT – THE MOMENT THE ENTIRE COUNTRY CAME TO A HALT AND THE WORLD OF SPORTS WAS THRUST INTO THE NATIONAL SPOTLIGHT.

Kirby Hocutt, Texas Tech Athletics' Director: I can't even say it's a different chapter in the book... it's a volume that sits on the shelf that didn't even exist 15, 16 months ago.

Peters: THE CANCELLATION OF SEASONS AND HOW A MULTI-MILLION DOLLAR ATHLETICS PROGRAM TRANSITIONED TO A LIFE LOCKED DOWN.

Peters: FEARLESS IS PRODUCED BY THE TEXAS TECH OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING. IT'S HOSTED BY ME, TAYLOR PETERS, WITH SPECIAL HELP FROM ALLISON HIRTH. FEARLESS IS A TEXAS TECH PRODUCTION – FROM HERE, IT'S POSSIBLE.

(Music)

Peters: HI EVERYONE, IT'S TAYLOR. THANKS FOR LISTENING TO FEARLESS... DON'T FORGET TO LIKE, REVIEW AND SUBSCRIBE WHEREVER YOU GET YOUR PODCASTS.