



Season 1 | Episode 3 | Remote Reality

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

Daniel, Student: Ever since I was little. I was born in Lubbock, so ever since I was little, Tech was always kind of my first choice.

Peters: THIS IS DANIEL... WE'VE DECIDED NOT TO USE HIS REAL NAME IN THIS PODCAST. HIS STORY IS PRETTY PERSONAL. HE JUST STARTED HIS THIRD YEAR ON CAMPUS... HE'S A HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY SCIENCES MAJOR, SAYS HE HAS ALWAYS WANTED TO HELP PEOPLE- SPECIFICALLY KIDS AND DEALING WITH GRIEF. WHEN COVID CLOSED THE CAMPUS, DANIEL WAS IN HIS SECOND SEMESTER AT TECH. JUST WHEN HE WAS STARTING TO GET THIS WHOLE COLLEGE THING FIGURED OUT... DANIEL IS A POLITE, FRIENDLY, SOCIAL YOUNG MAN. HE'S OPEN TO TALKING ABOUT HIS EXPERIENCES FROM COVID, TOO- GOOD AND BAD.

Daniel: ...It was the perfect choice, I applied other places but even if I had gotten accepted other places. Tech was still my go-to.

Peters: WHEN HE GRADUATED HIGH SCHOOL, HE WAS A GOOD STUDENT, MOSTLY A'S... A FEW B'S. THAT CARRIED INTO HIS FIRST SEMESTER ON CAMPUS... BUT DANIEL'S EXPERIENCE WITH THE PANDEMIC WAS BAD. IT WAS REALLY BAD. HE STRUGGLED AND WORRIED A LOT, ABOUT NOT BEING ABLE TO WORK AND PAY RENT. ABOUT NOT BEING ABLE TO KEEP UP WITH HIS CLASSES. SOMETHING WAS SHIFTING THAT HE COULDN'T QUITE FIGURE OUT- HE WASN'T ABLE TO FOCUS, HE COULDN'T COMPLETE MANY OF HIS ASSIGNMENTS, HE JUST COULDN'T GET A HANDLE ON IT.

Daniel: I was also later this year... or earlier this year diagnosed with pretty severe ADHD. I'm only able to learn when I'm physically in class. I can't watch a video; I can't sit in my room on a zoom call. I tried, I really tried. I need to be physically interacting with what we're doing.

Peters: DANIEL IS LIKE OTHER STUDENTS WHO THRIVE WITH IN-PERSON CLASSES. HE WASN'T ABLE TO COPE WITH THE ONLINE COURSE MATERIAL, AND NOT HAVING ACCESS TO HIS TEACHERS IN THE WAY HE TYPICALLY WOULD... HE NEEDED TO FIND A WAY TO GET BACK ON TRACK, BUT THINGS WEREN'T GOING WELL.HIS GRADES WERE SLIPPING.

Allison Hirth: Would you say, pre-COVID were you like A, B, C student?

Daniel: A, B mostly...

Hirth: And then after COVID, what are we looking at?

Daniel: ...C, low C and a couple failing. Some of the classes I was in were hard to understand even when I was in class, but at least I was there. I felt like I was falling and trying to grab on to something because there was... It felt like I was drowning.

Peters: NOT EVERY STUDENT HAD THE SAME ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE DURING THE PANDEMIC. BUT MANY CAN RELATE TO DANIEL. THE TRANSITION TO STAY AT HOME ORDERS WAS A WORST-CASE SCENARIO FOR SO MANY. AND THE SEEMINGLY ENDLESS CYCLE OF NOT KNOWING ONLY MADE EXISTING ISSUES WORSE. BUT WHATEVER YOUR EXPERIENCE, THE PANDEMIC FORCED ONE GROUP ON CAMPUS INTO THE SPOTLIGHT. THE ONES TYPICALLY BEHIND THE CURTAIN – OR IN THIS CASE, COMPUTER... WOULD SOON TAKE CENTER STAGE.

(Music)

Peters: THIS IS EPISODE THREE- REMOTE REALITY. WHEN THE CAMPUS CLOSED IN MID-MARCH, MANY OF US SCRAMBLED TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO FULFILL OUR JOB DUTIES IN THIS NEW, STRANGE WORK FROM HOME LIFE... I KNOW I DID. BUT BEHIND THE SCENES, IT TOOK A VILLAGE TO MAKE THAT TRANSITION POSSIBLE, AND SAM SEGRAN IS THE CHIEF. LITERALLY... HE HAS BEEN THE CHIEF INFORMATION OFFICER FOR THE I-T DIVISION FOR THE LAST 17 YEARS. SCOTT HALL – YOU'LL HEAR FROM HIM TOO - IS THE MANAGING DIRECTOR FOR I-T HELP-CENTRAL... SO, IF THERE'S AN ISSUE ON YOUR COMPUTER AND YOU'RE PART OF THE TEXAS TECH CAMPUS COMMUNITY... YOU'LL WANT TO TALK TO SOMEONE ON SCOTT'S TEAM. I'LL BE THE FIRST TO ADMIT THAT BEFORE WE SAT DOWN WITH SCOTT AND SAM, I WAY UNDERESTIMATED HOW INVOLVED THIS DEPARTMENT IS. AND HOW BUSY THEY ARE. PERIODICALLY, WHEN SAM IS TALKING, YOU'LL HEAR HIS PHONE ON THE TABLE NEXT TO US. HE IS ALMOST CONSTANTLY FIELDING CALLS AND EMAILS FROM SOMEONE NEEDING HIS EXPERTISE.

Allison Hirth: ...I want to make a note... you're on call all the time. Your job doesn't end when it's the weekend or you're working from home. Can we talk about that for a second?

Sam Segran, Chief Information Officer, Information Technology Division: IT services is 24/7 365. Scott will tell you; I'll take a call from anyone, any day, any time, it doesn't matter if I'm cruising in Alaska or Hawaii on vacation with my wife. I never put an out of office reply on my email because, to me, I love this university; we all do otherwise we wouldn't be here we all do.

Peters: I-T HAS ITS HANDS IN ALMOST EVERY OPERATION ON CAMPUS. WHAT THEY DO, THE SERVICES THEY PROVIDE ARE ESSENTIAL. AND NOTHING REVEALED OUR DEPENDANCE ON THEM QUITE LIKE COVID.

Segran: So many collaborations, between us and operations, between us and student financial aid, us and the Dean of Students, us and student health...

Peters: SAM REMEMBERED TAKING PART IN A PANDEMIC TRAINING ABOUT 13 YEARS AGO.

Segran: It was a tabletop exercise as to what would happen and what really happened was nowhere close to what we thought would happen during that time. Everything we were coming up with as we went. Early information was very helpful...

(Phone ringing on table)

Peters: THERE'S HIS PHONE AGAIN... IT WAS NOTHING LIKE ANY OF US COULD HAVE PREPARED FOR. BUT DEPITE THAT - THEY MADE IT WORK. THEY CONTACTED THE COLLEGES AND OTHER AREAS ON CAMPUS TO FIND OUT WHO NEEDED EQUIPMENT TO CONTINUE WORKING OR TAKING CLASSES FROM HOME... THINGS LIKE LAPTOPS AND HOTSPOTS. AND FINDING THOSE ITEMS PROVED TO BE A TALL ORDER...

Segran: Frenship ISD came to our rescue- they had purchased a large number of systems to upgrade their classrooms.

Peters: THERE WERE 300 LAPTOPS, AND I-T GOT INVOLVED WITH DELL TO GET THOSE COMPUTERS. I WANT TO BE CLEAR HERE, THEY WEREN'T GOING TO BE USED BY FRENSHIP ISD STUDENTS AT THAT TIME

Segran: ...We did something that hasn't been done before- we called Dell, we called Frenship, we called our procurement folks and asked if Frenship could sell it back to Dell and Dell could turn around and sell it to us.... And we made all the magic happen behind the scenes over calls and emails...

Peters: SCOTT HAD THE TASK OF GETTING THOSE COMPUTERS IN THE HANDS OF TEXAS TECH STUDENTS IN A CONTACT-LESS WAY.

Scott Hall, Managing Director, IT-Help Central: Those laptops we obtained, we had to image those. So, imaging those 300 laptops took a while. All the equipment we had inventory to make sure that when we gave it out, we could get it back, we had to develop a method to give it to them, physically. That was very challenging, especially the distribution of it to make sure our staff was safe and the customer was safe.

Peters: THEY PRIORITIZED GETTING STUDENTS INTERNET, TOO. AND THEY HAD TO BE CREATIVE WITH HOW THEY DID IT – WORKING WITH AT&T TO GET CELL PHONES TO WORK AS MOBILE HOT SPOTS AT A TIME WHEN THEY WERE IN HIGH DEMAND. AND THEIR EFFORTS EXTENDED BEYOND EDUCATION. AS THE UNIVERSITY EXPANDED ITS WORK, THE I-T DIVISION PROVED EVEN MORE VALUABLE.

Segran: We got called by TIEHH for help, because they were doing the first testing for the state of Texas... but they needed help.

Peters: JUST TO CONNECT THE DOTS HERE- HE'S TALKING ABOUT TIEHH- T-I-E-H-H... IT'S THE INSTITUTE OF ENVIRONMENTAL AND HUMAN HEALTH. THE BIO-THREAT RESEARCH LAB WE TALKED ABOUT IN EPISODE ONE, REMEMBER STEVE PRESLEY...

(Tour of The Institute of Environmental and Human Health)

Steve Presley: Right now, she is just taking samples in.

Peters: IT'S ALL PART OF TIEHH.

Segran: We were involved in that. Dr. Kathy Austin's team helped me with that one. Jeff Barrington's security team helped with the security pieces because this is PHI data.

Peters: THIS WAS HIGHLY SENSITIVE DATA... THE PERSONAL HEALTH INFORMATION OF THOSE COVID-19 SAMPLES BEING TESTED NEEDED TO BE PROTECTED. AND IT JUST SO HAPPENED, A YEAR BEFORE THE PANDEMIC, MORE THAN A DOZEN EMPLOYEES TOOK PART IN A TRAINING SPECIFICALLY ON HANDLING MEDICAL DATA.

Segran: Instead of training three or four people in security for handling HIPPA data, I went ahead and brought a trainer in and 16 of us went through training. So, when the time came, we had 16 people trained in how to handle medical data. It wasn't planned for but it just happened, so it was serendipitous for us in how those things happened.

Peters: THERE WERE SO MANY PEOPLE CONNECTED TO AND INVOLVED IN EVERY DECISION, EVERY ACTION MADE BY THE UNIVERSITY. SAM SAYS HE'LL NEVER FORGET WATCHING HOW WE ALL CAME TOGETHER.

Segran: The resilience of our staff. Nobody complained... anything I asked, they did.

Peters: IT GOES WITHOUT SAYING THAT THEY DID A LOT, THAT THEY *DO A LOT. AND IN SO MANY CASES, THEIR WORK MADE ALL THE DIFFERENCE FOR FACULTY, FOR STAFF AND FOR STUDENTS.

Patrick Hughes, Vice Provost for University Programs and Student Success: I've been here in the provost office for...Shoot, over 10 years, I think.

Peters: AND WHEN IT COMES TO STUDENT SUCCESS, THERE ARE FEW PEOPLE ON CAMPUS MORE DEDICATED TO IT THAN THIS MAN.

Hughes: Okay, my name is Patrick Hughes, and my title is vice provost for university programs and student success.

Peters: PATRICK'S WORK WITHIN THE UNIVERSITY IS GEARED TOWARD UNDERSTANDING WHAT MAKES STUDENTS SUCCEED- IN THE CLASSROOM AND BEYOND. AND HE'S COMMITTED TO LEARNING WHAT CREATES A QUOTE-UNQUOTE SUCCESSFUL STUDENT EXPERIENCE AND HOW THE UNIVERSITY CAN BETTER PROVIDE THAT. HE KEEPS TRACK OF RETENTION RATES, GPA, ENROLLMENT.

Hughes: COVID impacted every corner of campus.

Peters: HE HAS A LOT OF RESPONSIBILITIES ON CAMPUS.

Hughes: I teach communication and personal relationships, communication in higher ed, just about anything the department asks me to teach.

Peters: HE'S ALSO A PROFESSOR IN THE COLLEGE OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION. HIS AREA OF EXPERTISE IS INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION...HE HAS WRITTEN EXTENSIVELY ABOUT THIS TOPIC. THAT'S THE OTHER REASON I WANTED TO SPEAK WITH HIM. WHAT EXACTLY IS INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION? AND WHY DOES THAT MATTER IN THE CLASSROOM?

Hughes: There are two kinds of information that is communicated in any interpersonal relationship- messages of content, in this case knowledge of a particular field or technical information.

Peters: HE GOES ON TO TALK ABOUT DIFFERENT KINDS OF INFORMATION AND HOW IT'S SHARED.

Hughes: In a lot of ways, the kind of creativity that certain kinds of technology used to distribute course content is not as good at facilitating.

Peters: STUDIES SHOW THAT STUDENTS OFTEN LEARN BETTER IN A HYBRID SETTING, WHERE TECHNOLOGY AND INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION IS INTERTWINED. AND COVID VALIDATED THAT. MAYBE ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT NUMBERS PATRICK DEALS WITH IS GRADUATION RATES. HE WANTED TO KNOW WHAT PERCENTAGE OF RED RAIDERS WOULD STILL COMPLETE THEIR DEGREE PLANS AS SCHEDULED. PRIOR TO COVID- HE SAYS THE 6 YEAR GRADUATION RATE WAS 61%... AT THE TIME THIS PODCAST WAS RECORDED, IT WAS UP TO 63.3%. THE FOUR-YEAR RATE WENT UP, TOO. FROM 38-41%.

Hughes: These are exciting results and encouraging results. We've been growing in all of these metrics, over the last six years. We were concerned because that was not the story nationwide. Nationwide among other four-year universities and colleges is a story of attrition, losing students. We were able to not just maintain our enrollment numbers but grow or increase over last year's outcomes.

Peters: AND WHAT ABOUT GRADE POINT AVERAGES?

Hughes: There hasn't been a lot of variation in GPA, from pre-pandemic to the middle and now afterwards...

Peters: THIS WASN'T THE CASE FOR EVERY STUDENT, OF COURSE. BUT PATRICK'S INFORMATION REVEALS THAT THE PASS RATES WEREN'T IMPACTED, GOOD OR BAD, WHEN CLASSES MOVED ONLINE. ALL OF THIS WAS ENCOURAGING FOR PATRICK. IT SHOWED THAT BOTH STUDENTS AND FACULTY WERE ABLE TO ADAPT. THAT THEY DIDN'T JUST SURVIVE IT, MANY WERE BETTER BECAUSE OF IT. PROFESSORS WERE PIVOTING... FOR MANY, THE MOVE ONLINE MEANT TIME AND PATIENCE. UNIVERSITY PRESIDENT LAWRENCE SCHOVANEC FELT FOR HIS FACULTY... AS SOMEONE WHO USED TO TEACH, HE WAS RIGHT THERE WITH THEM. HIS WIFE, PATTY IS AN INSTRUCTOR AND ADVISOR IN THE MATH DEPARTMENT... SHE WAS HAVING TO ADAPT TOO. AND IT WAS HARD.

Lawrence Schovanec, President, Texas Tech University: I don't know that everybody would realize how much effort that took. I watched my wife, back in the spring, she was on the computer from when she woke up to when she went to sleep.

Peters: SHE WAS COMMITTED TO HELPING HER STUDENTS GET THROUGH. THEY ALL WERE... AND SOME NEEDED A LITTLE MORE HELP THAN OTHERS. THAT'S WHERE HOLLEY BAKER COMES IN. THE VIDEO PRODUCTION LAB IS NESTLED AMONG OFFICES ON THE FIRST FLOOR OF DRANE HALL. THAT'S WHERE WE MET WITH HOLLEY, SHE IS ENTHUSIASTIC AND CLEARLY PASSIONATE ABOUT HER WORK. WHAT SHE DOES IS PRETTY NEAT.

Holley Baker Instructional Designer, Video Production Lab: We're available to all professors.

Peters: BY THE WAY... THERE'S A HUM COMING FROM A LIGHT IN THE LAB... YOU'LL HEAR IT DURING HOLLEY'S INTERVIEW.

Baker: We help people completely take entire programs that are face-to-face and move them to a 100% online delivery.

Peters: THERE ARE SEVERAL DIFFERENT WAYS SHE DOES THIS- SOME PROFESSORS USE A GREEN SCREEN.

(Professor Talking)

Peters: SOME WERE FILMED ON-SITE. SHE SHOWED ME ONE VIDEO INTRODUCING BIOLOGY 1401... PLANT BIOLOGY. A PROFESSOR WITH SHOULDER-LENGTH BLONDE HAIR COMES ON THE SCREEN IN PROTECTIVE EYEWEAR AND A WHITE LAB COAT, WELCOMING THE VIEWER TO LAB 7.

Professor: Welcome to lab 7.

Peters: THE VIDEO GOES ON TO SHOW SOIL, SUN AND DIFFERENT PLANTS IN DIFFERENT ENVIRONMENTS... SHE'S TEACHING ABOUT PHOTOSYNTHESIS AND RESPIRATION. THIS ONE IS SHORT... ONLY ABOUT 2 AND HALF MINUTES LONG. BUT IT'S EFFECTIVE. HOLLEY PRODUCED THIS VIDEO, MADE IT AVAILABLE FOR THE PROFESSOR TO SHARE WITH HER STUDENTS. OTHERS CHOOSE TO USE SOMETHING CALLED THE LEARNING GLASS. I GOT TO SEE THIS IN PERSON- IT'S WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE. THE INSTRUCTOR STANDS IN BETWEEN A BLACK CURTAIN, AND A HUGE WINDOW. A CAMERA FILMS THROUGH THE GLASS AND YOU CAN USE MARKERS TO DRAW OR DEMONSTRATE. IT'S REALLY COOL.

Baker: ...We had some professors that do intense physics or math lectures. It was uncertain how we could translate that all online and they weren't comfortable on zoom, so we brought them in here.

Peters: THE LAB HAD ONLY BEEN OPEN FOR ABOUT TWO WEEKS WHEN THE CAMPUS WAS SHUT DOWN... SO SHE BARELY HAD TIME TO GET THE WORD OUT ABOUT WHAT COULD BE DONE IN THE SPACE.

Holley Baker: "We had about between 8 and 10 professors come in. Typically, they would be larger projects. It wasn't just one professor and one video- I would have one professor come in and we'd do 20 videos.

Peters: SHE SAYS THEY DIDN'T JUST SURVIVE THIS TRANSITION... THEY THRIVED. IN FACT, SHE PRODUCED CONTENT FOR SOMEONE WHO RECEIVED A TEACHER OF THE YEAR AWARD... FOR HIS WORK DURING THE PANDMIC. AND HE TALKED ABOUT USING THE BOARD, AND THE HELP HOLLEY PROVIDED. SHE IS PROUD OF THAT, AND SHE SHOULD BE- SHE EMPOWERED THOSE PROFESSORS TO CONNECT WITH STUDENTS. TO GO THE EXTRA MILE.

Baker: More than anything, the theme that emerged from covid it was 'yes we can'. The truth is 'Yes we can!' We didn't just do it, but we did it well.

Peters: RESEARCH ON CAMPUS ALSO PERSISTED- EVEN UNDER THESE UNUSUAL CIRCUMSTANCES. AND THE RESULT? WELL, LET'S JUST SAY THE NUMBERS WERE GOOD, BETTER THAN GOOD ACTUALLY.

Joe Heppert, Vice President for Research and Innovation: I'm Joe Heppert, I am the Vice President for Research and Innovation at Texas Tech...

Peters: WHEN WE ASKED JOE HEPPERT TO EXPLAIN WHAT GOES INTO THAT... IT TOOK HIM FOUR WHOLE MINUTES.

Allison Hirth: It's safe to say you have a few responsibilities.

Peters: JOE WAS CANDID WHEN WE TALKED TO HIM, HE WAS VULNERABLE.

Heppert: Well, one of the things that stood out to me in the pandemic is that life moves on.

Peters: HIS EYES GOT MISTY A COUPLE OF TIMES IN THE 45 MINUTE CONVERSATION- LIKE WHEN HE TALKED ABOUT HIS COLLEAGUE WHO LOST HER HUSBAND DURING THE PANDEMIC. OR WHEN HE BRINGS UP HIS YOUNGEST DAUGHTER WHO DELAYED HER WEDDING FOR 8 MONTHS. SHE FINALLY MARRIED HER NOW HUSBAND IN A SMALL BACKYARD CEREMONY IN CALIFORNIA.

Heppert: The good things and bad things, but I truly think the experience really brought an understanding of what things are truly important in life.

Peters: WHILE THE COUNTRY HAD PIVOTED TO WORKING FROM HOME, UNDER JOE'S LEADERSHIP, THE PRIORITIES DIDN'T CHANGE - THE WORK DIDN'T STOP - AND IN SOME CASES, IT COULDN'T.

Heppert: ...we have these contracts with the federal government and even with private sector sponsors and philanthropic sponsors to conduct research as an institution. We all realized, not knowing the characteristics of this virus, that we would have to move off campus for a while and that meant that some of the research was going to have to shut down. We had a few projects on campus that were sensitive in nature and the federal sponsors expected us to follow through and finish the project on time.

Peters: SO, THEY HAD TO ADAPT- THEY DEVELOPED AN APPLICATION PROCESS TO FIGURE OUT WHICH RESEARCH PROJECTS COULD CONTINUE IN PERSON. THEY ALSO DEVELOPED PROTOCOLS FOR INDIVIDUALS IN LAB SPACES.

Heppert: At one time we had 40 people still in labs on campus...

Peters: THEY TOOK EXTRA CAUTION, AND IT PAID OFF.

Heppert: ...We were so surprised, there were extremely few cases that occurred among researchers on campus.

Peters: I WAS INTERESTED IN WHAT TYPES OF RESEARCH PROJECTS DID CONTINUE. JOE SAYS ABOUT 20 PROJECTS REMAINED ACTIVE FROM MARCH TO MAY 2020... SOME HERE IN LUBBOCK AND OTHERS ACROSS THE STATE AT REMOTE FIELD SITES. SOME WERE SEASONAL, THEY HAD TO BE CONDUCTED AT THAT SPECIFIC TIME OF THE YEAR... SOME INCLUDED EXPERIMENTAL ANIMALS... SOME WERE EVEN FUNDED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE. THESE WERE TIME-SENSITIVE, HIGHLY EXPENSIVE PROJECTS THAT COULD HAVE BEEN COMPROMISED IF THEY WERE TO STOP. IT COULD HAVE WASTED MONEY, TIME AND RESEARCH EFFORTS THAT WERE IRREPLACABLE.

Heppert: That's a very interesting phenomenon....

Peters: WHEN IT CAME TO RESEARCH FUNDING... JOE FOUND THAT WHEN IT REALLY MATTERED, AND WHERE IT MATTERED, IN GRANT PROPOSALS, HIS DEPARTMENT WAS THRIVING.

Heppert: Last year, TTU submitted the highest number of external proposals than we have ever done. By the end of the year, we were up 10% in overall proposal submissions. We had the largest year ever in terms of overall proposals funded and the largest year in terms of federal awards for Texas Tech. So, it was an amazing observation during that period.

Peters: THE FACT THAT DESPITE COVID - THE UNIVERSITY WAS ABLE TO SECURE MORE RESEARCH GRANTS, MORE FEDERAL AWARDS... THAT WAS SURPRISING. HE ALSO MADE IT A POINT TO MENTION SOMETHING ELSE - SOMETHING THAT CAUGHT MY ATTENTION.

Heppert: There is data that show female faculty presumably because they were engaged immediately as school shut down in caring for children and helping facilitate online education, it shows that they may have been disproportionately impacted by this whole experience.

Peters: THE NEW YORK TIMES DID AN ENTIRE SERIES ABOUT THIS CALLED THE PRIMAL SCREAM LINE... IT SAYS 69 PERCENT OF MOTHERS SAY THEY SUFFERED FROM NEGATIVE HEALTH AFFECTS DUE TO WORRY AND STRESS RELATED TO THE PANDEMIC. WORKING FULL TIME FROM HOME—BEING A BUSINESSWOMAN, A MOTHER, A TEACHER AND TUTOR... COOKING, CLEANING... IT SEEMED IMPOSSIBLE. THERE'S HARDLY ENOUGH HOURS IN THE DAY TO GET IT ALL DONE. BUT THE FACULTY AT TEXAS TECH - INCLUDING THOSE RAISING CHILDREN - FIGURED IT OUT, DESPITE THE FACT THE PANDEMIC CHANGED THE WAY THEY HAD TO DO IT.

(Music)

(Walking Footsteps)

Peters: ALIZA WONG'S OFFICE IS A SHORT WALK FROM THE ADMINISTRATION BUILDING. SHE'S ON THE SECOND FLOOR OF THE HONORS COLLEGE. WE SHOWED UP A FEW MINUTES EARLY BUT SHE WAS WAITING FOR US AND WELCOMED US IN.

Aliza Wong, Interim Dean, Honors College: I was complaining that there was no spring break, then all of a sudden, it's commencement.

Peters: HER OFFICE IS MODERN, STYLISH AND IT SMELLS LIKE CLEAN LINEN AND FRESH FLOWERS. AND SHE MAKES YOU FEEL AT HOME.

Wong: I love my staff and my staff have been wonderful because they've been here with us every step of the way, they've been back in the office...

Peters: WHEN I ASK FOR HER OFFICIAL TITLE, SHE TALKS ABOUT HOW SHE STARTED HERE AT TEXAS TECH, HOW LONG SHE SPENT IN EACH POSITION, ABOUT HER STUDIES OF MODERN ITALIAN HISTORY AND THE MEDITERRANEAN. SHE TALKS LOVINGLY ABOUT TEXAS TECH. AND YOU CAN'T HELP BUT FEEL IT SITTING ACROSS THE TABLE. SHE'S ARTICULATE... AND IN THE SPRING OF 2020 WAS VERY MUCH FOCUSED ON GETTING THE FACTS ABOUT COVID.

Aliza Wong: Epidemiologists had been warning us for centuries that this was going to happen. We had controlled it for so long, but this was on the horizon.

Peters: AND WHEN YOU GET HER TALKING ABOUT HER STUDENTS, YOU MAY BE THERE FOR A WHILE. AND WHAT I MEAN BY THAT IS THAT HER PASSION FOR TEACHING, HER RELATIONSHIPS WITH HER STUDENTS MATTER.

Wong: I had already warned my students before they left for spring break to take everything with them. Anything you need, anything you love, take with you because I don't know that we will be returning to campus.

Peters: SHE DIDN'T WANT TO WORRY ANYONE, BUT SHE HAD TO MAKE SURE THEY REALIZED THAT THE THREAT WAS REAL.

Wong: I was telling my students in my summit experience course; it's going to come here. This is no joke. The pandemic was bad in 1917, during the first world war, food shortages, extreme cold... but we didn't have the type of confluence of travel and communications we do now.

Peters: SHE WAS THINKING ABOUT HER STUDENTS LIKE SHE WAS THINKING ABOUT HER OWN SON. HE'S A 2020 GRADUATE OF LUBBOCK HIGH...

Wong: I'm inspired by them. It's my hope, as it was Michael San-Francisco's hope, as it is many of my colleague's hope, that our students surpass us. That they are better than us. That they do more than us. If this pandemic has proved anything, it's that they have...

Peters: IN A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT WAY, STUDENTS FUEL THE LIVELIHOOD OF MICHAEL CLINTSMAN.

Michael Clintsman, Lubbock Business Owner: For the most part we live and die by Texas Tech students.

Peters: PARTICULARLY WHEN IT COMES TO THEIR NIGHT LIFE ROUTINES.

HE'S NOT A TEXAS TECH PROFESSOR, HE'S NOT ON STAFF. HIS THREE BUSINESSES ARE WITHIN A HALF SQUARE MILE OF EACH OTHER... JUST A FEW STEPS FROM MEMORIAL CIRCLE. HE AND HIS WIFE OWN THREE COLLEGE BARS ON BROADWAY.

Clintsman: It's what I know. I wouldn't have it any other way, I feel very fortunate. I don't know how I ended up right next to the university, but I am very blessed for sure.

Peters: THE DOORS TO ALL THREE CLOSED AFTER COVID HIT.

Clintsman: It was hard walking around 3 empty businesses day, after day, after day... locked the door up when I left, and it would just sit like that. It was scary and sad.

Peters: THAT'S NEXT TIME ON FEARLESS.

(Music)

Peters: FEARLESS IS A TEXAS TECH PRODUCTION – FROM HERE, IT'S POSSIBLE.

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