



## Season 1 | Episode 6 | A Comeback from COVID

(Cart rolling on street)

Move In Helper: If you go over there, there's man in a cowboy hat that will give you the whole spiel.

Move In Helper 2: Hey, how's it going? Can I get your ID? Thank you so much.

Reese Carson, Student: I guess the fact that it's tradition to move in. So, I'm thankful we get to continue this tradition and actually move in.

Peters: Are you a freshman?

Carson: Yes.

Peters: Yes! So, this is a big day!

Mrs. Carson: This is a big day!

Peters: Is this your first time doing this?

Mrs. Carson: No, his sister just graduated from the business school in May. So, it's kind of a revolving door here at Tech and Murray. So, this is our second and last to be in Murray.

Penny Mitchel, Student: This is our second time doing this. She will be a junior at the end of fall, so last year was her first year.

Hannah Mitchell, Student: I'm just ready to go in and know what I'm doing. And knowing my way around, not trying to walk to class and ending up on the highway again.

(Laughter)

Peters: That didn't happen, did it?

Hannah Mitchell: Oh, it happened like five times.

Move in Helper: Alright, here you go man.

Student: Thank you, boss.

Move In Helper 2: Have a good day, Tyler!

Move In Helper: Here you go, Natalie.

Peters: What are in these packets?

Move In Helper: So in these packets, there's the room key, that's the main thing. There's a bunch of coupons and a parent magazine. The parking pass to put on your car when you move in.

(Car door slamming)

Dad: Okay, we're off to the races. Very slowly.

Student: Here we go!

Mrs. Carson: We are so blessed that Texas Tech has put everything in place for him to be safe but also that he gets to have a real college experience. And do everything that his sister got to do four years ago. So, we are very excited that he's here and the timing seems to be perfect. We're Red Radier fans all the way.

(Music)

Peters: THERE ARE STILL A LOT OF UNCERTAINTIES THAT MANY OF US FEEL... AND WE RECOGNIZE THAT COVID IS NOT OVER YET. BUT TODAY, WE'RE DOING WHAT WE CAN. IN THIS FINAL EPISODE... WE CONTINUE THE FIGHT AGAINST THIS VIRUS. AS CASES SURGE ACROSS THE COUNTRY, WE ARE ALL DETERMINED TO FIND A WAY BACK. WE ARE USING WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED TO SHAPE OUR RESPONSE TO THIS NEW VARIANT... WITH HOPES THAT SOON WE CAN ALL CALL IT A COMEBACK.

(Music)

Peters: THIS IS OUR SIXTH AND FINAL EPISODE OF SEASON ONE - A COMEBACK FROM COVID.

(Footsteps)

Taylor Peters, Host: THE TEXAS TECH SYSTEM BUILDING IS QUIET AND DIGNIFIED. EVERYTHING ABOUT IT IS PERFECT, FROM THE OUTSIDE, IN.

(Door opening)

Peters: THE FOYER IS ELEGANT... ENORMOUS GLASS DOORS WELCOME IN THE AFTERNOON SUN, CASTING LIGHT ONTO THE MASSIVE RUG AND OVERSIZED CUSHY CHAIRS BENEATH A GRAND PUBLIC ART DISPLAY THAT HANGS ABOVE. ACROSS THE ROOM, THERE'S A DARK BROWN BANISTER, WAITING TO ESCORT YOU TO THE SECOND FLOOR.

(Music)

Peters: WE'RE OFFERED A SEAT AND WATER FOR THE FEW MINUTES WE WAIT. BILLY CURRINGTON ON THE SPEAKER KEEPS GOOD COMPANY.

(Music)

Billy Currington, Musician: Is this Georgia heat playing trick on me, or am I really seeing what I think I'm seeing...

Peters: WE'RE HERE TO MEET THE CHANCELLOR OF THE TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY SYSTEM. WE TAKE THE ELEVATOR UP, WHERE AFTER A SERIES OF GLASS DOORS, WE FIND HIM SITTING AT THE END OF A LONG, WOODEN TABLE COVERED IN PAPERS. HE'S CLEARLY IN THE MIDDLE OF SOMETHING IMPORTANT, BUT HE MADE TIME FOR US.

Tedd Mitchell, Chancellor, Texas Tech University: Hello, come on it. How are y'all doing?

Peters: Good, how are you?

Peters: I'VE ONLY EVER SEEN HIM IN A SUIT AND LONG WHITE COAT, TRADITIONAL FOR A DOCTOR... BUT TODAY HE'S CASUAL- BOOTS AND JEANS AND A BUTTON DOWN.

Mitchell: Are you ready?

Peters: Whenever you are.

Mitchell: Okay, my name is Tedd Mitchell and I'm the Chancellor of the Texas Tech University system.

Peters: I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHERE TO BEGIN ASKING QUESTIONS ABOUT HIS ROLE AS CHANCELLOR... AND I DON'T HIDE THAT WELL... BUT HE IS KIND AND HELPFUL.

Allison Hirth: What does a chancellor do?

Mitchell: Someone once said that being the President of a University is like standing in a graveyard... there's a lot of people under you and nobody is listening.... Being a chancellor is even more than that, there's A LOT of people under you and ain't nobody listening.

Peters: NICE TRY, CHANCELLOR... THAT'S NOT TRUE, OF COURSE. HE USES LOT OF EXPRESSIONS LIKE THIS, YOU'LL SEE. BUT IN SO MANY WORDS HE WENT ON TO COMPARE HIS POSITION AS CHANCELLOR TO A CEO OF A HOLDING COMPANY. IN FACT, THE DAY BEFORE WE MET WITH HIM, IT WAS ANNOUNCED THAT MIDWESTERN STATE WOULD OFFICALLY BECOME THE 5TH INSTITUTION WITHIN THE SYSTEM. EACH OF THEM HAS ITS OWN PRESIDENT, ITS OWN STAFF TO OPERATE THE CAMPUS.

Mitchell: It's silly for me to tell Texas Tech 'these need to be your priorities,' or the Health Sciences Center 'these need to be your priorities,' they come to us and say, 'these are our priorities', and our job is to say, 'okay what can we do to help you accomplish that?'

Peters: BUT EVEN WITH THE WORK OF INDIVIDUAL CAMPUS LEADERSHIP, THE CHANCELLOR HAS A VERY LONG LIST OF RESPONSIBILITIES. AND DURING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC, THAT ONLY INTENSIFIED.

Mitchell: (pause) When everything started hitting, the first charge to our system is taking care of our students, staff, and faculty. Period. Safety.

Peters: AND HE WOULD KNOW SOMETHING ABOUT THAT.

Mitchell: 57:30 The Lord protects children and fools... and I'm not a child.

Peters: SEE WHAT I MEAN?

Mitchell: ...So, one of the things that was fortuitous to me, is that I'm a physician. I can't help but think about things like that as a physician.

Peters: AND IT'S LUCKY FOR US, TOO. HIS UNDERSTANDING WOULD HELP HIM MAKE DECISIONS FOR THE WHOLE SYSTEM. AND TO ADVISE OTHERS AS CRITICAL OPERATIONS CAME TO LIGHT. SO, FOR THE SECOND TIME, I'M GOING TO SEND YOU BACK TO EPISODE ONE. BACK TO A FAMILIAR CHARACTER.

Steve Presley Director, The Institute of Environmental and Human Health: My name is Steve Presley.

Peters: BECAUSE LIKE SEVERAL OF THE PEOPLE WE TALKED WITH, TEDD MITCHELL HAS A STORY ABOUT STEVE.

Presley: I'm the Director of The Institute of Environmental and Human Health.

Mitchell: Dr. Steve Presley who runs that said 'you know what? I can take what is a reference lab here and convert this into a real lab for testing'. He needed people who are laboratory technicians and guess what we have here? We have a department of clinical laboratory sciences where we train people to be medical technologists and laboratory scientists.

Peters: SO, THE HEALTH SCIENCES CENTER GOT HIM SOME HELP. BUT THAT'S NOT ALL THEY DID.

Mitchell: That call I got from Uly was unbelievable.

Peters: IT WOULD GO ON TO BE ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL MOMENTS OF THE PANDEMIC FOR THE CHANCELLOR, THAT CALL. AND LET ME TELL YOU, IT'S A GOOD STORY. BY THE WAY, WHEN HE REFERS TO ULY- HE'S TALKING ABOUT DR. ULRICH BICKEL, HE'S AN ASSOCIATE DEAN OF SCIENCES AND A PROFESSOR OF PHARMACOLOGY. HE'S ORIGINALLY FROM GERMANY BUT HAS BEEN AT THE HEALTH SCIENCES CENTER SCHOOL OF PHARMACY IN AMARILLO FOR 30 YEARS. I'M NOT ON A FIRST NAME BASIS WITH DR. BICKLE, BUT I THINK FOR THE SAKE OF THIS PODCAST IT'LL BE OKAY IF I CALL HIM ULY TOO.

Mitchell: When you put a swab in someone's nose and put it in a test tube, the gel at the bottom of that is called viral transport media, VTM, that was one of the things we had none of, around the state, around the community, around anywhere. I got a call from Ule Bickle. He called and said to Ted, I'm looking at this and if I have the right ingredients, I can produce this. I've been on the CDC website and if I can get some funding and I can get some help, I can make this.

Peters: SO, THEY GOT ULY THE HELP AND FUNDING HE ASKED FOR... AND HE DID IT. THE VTM HE WAS PRODUCING, WOULD GO ON TO HELP STEVE AND HIS TEAM PROCESS AND TEST THOSE COVID-19 SAMPLES. ULY PUT ALL OF HIS OTHER PROJECTS ON TEMPORARY HOLD FOR THIS. AND WORD OF WHAT HE WAS DOING SPREAD ACROSS THE WHOLE STATE OF TEXAS...

Mitchell: I get a call from a friend of mine at the University of Texas system and he says, 'I hear you guys are making VTM, can you produce this for us as well?' So, we started producing it for their health-related. I got a call from the governor's office 'I hear you're producing VTM, can you make it for other places across the state?' So, we started producing VTM that we were sending this all over the state for testing.

Peters: BY DECEMBER OF 2020, THEY HAD PRODUCED MORE THAN 500-THOUSAND VIALS OF VTM THAT WERE BEING USED IN HOSPITALS, CLINICS AND SCHOOLS ACROSS THE STATE. AND THAT NUMBER WOULD CONTINUE TO GROW.

Mitchell: And nobody asked Uly to do this, he just stepped up and said 'I can do this'.

Peters: SOME PARTS OF THE PANDEMIC WERE LIKE THIS FOR THE CHANCELLOR. BUT SOME DAYS WERE EXTREMELY FRUSTRATING. YOU REMEMBER THE CONFLICTING INFORMATION BEING RELAYED ACROSS THE COUNTRY, THE FEAR THAT STEMMED FROM SIMPLY NOT KNOWING WHAT THE TRUTH WAS... HE FELT THAT, AND HE WANTED TO GET THE FACTS. BUT THAT WOULD END UP BEING A LOT HARDER THAN IT SOUNDS.

(Music)

Peters: THAT'S COMING UP ON FEARLESS... NOEL SLOAN'S OFFICE IS JUST A FEW FEET FROM THE PRESIDENTS. DURING THE COVID CRISIS ON CAMPUS, THESE TWO WERE VERY BUSY AND IN CONSTANT COMMUNICATION. SHE SERVES AS VICE PRESIDENT FOR ADMINISTRATION AND FINANCE... SHE'S ALSO THE CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER FOR THE UNIVERSITY. BUT SHE WEARS MANY HATS AND HAS MANY RESPONSIBILITIES ON CAMPUS. ONE OF THOSE IS CAMPUS SAFETY AND SECURITY, AND UNDER THAT IS EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT.

Noel Sloan, Vice President for Administration and Finance and Chief Financial Officer: I felt that we really needed to have someone in that position for emergency management separate from the Police Department and the Fire Marshall.

Peters: IT GOES WITHOUT SAYING, WE WERE DEALING WITH UNPRECEDENTED CIRCUMSTANCES. CAMPUS WAS CLOSED AND NOW THAT WE WERE SPREAD OUT ACROSS

THE WORLD, NOEL, ALONG WITH OTHER HIGH LEVEL ADMINISTRATORS, WERE FOCUSED ON HOW TO KEEP THE LINES OF COMMUNICATION OPEN. ENTER MATT DEWEY.

Matt Dewey, Chief Marketing and Communications Officer: We went down two paths. It was one, what are the decisions going to be....

Peters: HE'S THE CHIEF MARKETING AND COMMUNICATION OFFICER FOR THE UNIVERSITY.

Dewey: And then, how are we going to communicate that?

Peters: THAT'S WHAT MATT'S TEAM DOES. THEY'RE MY TEAM TOO, ACTUALLY. MATT IS MY BOSS. HIS FIRST FEW MONTHS ON CAMPUS WERE CHALLENGING- HE STARTED IN NOVEMBER, JUST FOUR MONTHS BEFORE THE START OF THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC... JUST LONG ENOUGH TO GET TO KNOW HIS TEAM.

Dewey: Literally, those early days, we had students abroad.

Sloan: I remember, very vividly, when we needed to bring our students back from study abroad.

Dewey: We have 40,000 students on campus, 7,000 staff. So we really had to figure out how do we use the tools at our disposal. How do we use Tech Alert, social media, email? We made a decision very early on that we were going to overcommunicate. We wanted to get the president in front of this, but also everyone else.

Peters: AND THEY DID THEIR BEST. AS HIS STAFF WAS MAKING THE TRANSITION TO WORKING FROM HOME, THEY WERE IN OVERDRIVE. PULLING OUT ALL THE STOPS TO MAKE SURE INFORMATION WAS ACCURATE AND TIMELY. IT WAS A LOT OF WORK. THEY DID IT WITH EMAILS, PRESS RELEASES, SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGNS AND POSTS, MESSAGES FROM THE PRESIDENT, PHOTOS AND VIDEOS.

(Dean Messages)

Peters: AND AS WE MOVED PAST THOSE EARLY DAYS, CAMPUS LEADERS WERE WORKING QUICKLY WITH LOCAL AND STATE HEALTH OFFICIALS TO SET UP COVID TESTING SITES ON CAMPUS. FIRST AS A DRIVE THROUGH OR WALK-UP...

Sloan: In the early days, when it was all so new, one of the locations was in the parking lot of the Texas Tech Museum....

Peters: THEN TO VARIOUS OTHER LOCATIONS ACROSS CAMPUS.

Sloan: I think in total, there were over 25,000 tests that were done throughout our academic year last year..

Peters: AND BEFORE THE VACCINE WAS EVEN ON THE MARKET, THE PRESIDENT CREATED A COMMITTEE TO DISCUSS HOW THE UNIVERSITY COULD PROVIDE A CONVENIENT OPTION FOR ANYONE TO GET THE SHOT.

Sloan: So, procurement was being part of that, talking about what kinds of freezers we would need to buy to store the vaccines, we were looking at that, getting orders placed so that when vaccines became available, we would have a place to store them.

Peters: UNITED SUPERMARKETS REACHED OUT WHEN THE VACCINE BECAME AVAILABLE FOR YOUNG ADULTS.

Sloan: They said they could provide the personnel to offer it on the TTU campus, and again that just made so much sense.

(Vaccine Clinic)

Angel Acheampong, Student: My name is Angel.

Hannah McGrath, Student: I'm Hannah McGrath.

Tanner Jordan, Student: It's Tanner, Jordan.

Hirth: And what's your classification?

Jordan: I'm a senior. I've had perfect attendance from kindergarten to 8th grade, so I never get sick. I didn't need it, but I had family coming for graduation, you have older members. I didn't want to take it away if someone needed it better than me. It was just readily available so why not today?

Peters: THESE ARE JUST A FEW OF THE STUDENTS WE MET AT ONE OF THE VACCINE CLINICS INSIDE THE UNITED SUPERMARKETS ARENA IN APRIL OF 2021. THE COURT WAS BEING REDONE, SO YOU'LL HEAR THAT CONSTRUCTION IN THE BACKGROUND.

Acheampong: I miss the outdoors; I miss the regular life. I had COVID and I felt like I was going to die so anything not to get it again. For two days I couldn't breathe.

Peters: THAT'S ANGEL, HER MOM IS A NURSE AND BOTH OF HER PARENTS WERE HOSPITALIZED WITH COVID. ANGEL HAD BRAIN SURGERY DURING THE PANDEMIC, IT WASN'T COVID RELATED BUT THE HOSPITAL EXPERIENCE WAS DEFINITELY DIFFERENT. SHE COULDN'T HAVE ANY VISITORS.

Acheampong: I feel a little relieved knowing that I don't have to worry about getting COVID again, I'm one step closer to not being scared anymore.

Peters: MOST STUDENTS CHOSE THIS CLINIC BECAUSE OF CONVENIENCE, AND THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT THE UNIVERSITY HAD HOPED FOR.

McGrath: It was easy and quick, no problem at all. You go in, tell them what time your appointment is, sign some paperwork if you haven't already filled it out online, wait in a line and get your shot real quick. Then wait 15 minutes. That was the part that took the longest, the waiting afterwards.

Jordan: They had plenty of time. They had free parking, I walked up, and it was smooth going through.

Peters: THE EMAIL TO SIGN UP FOR THE VACCINE ON CAMPUS CAME STRAIGHT TO STUDENT'S INBOXES. IT COULD NOT GET EASIER THAN THAT.

Dewey: In terms of communicating early on, through the testing and into 2021 with the vaccines, I think it's really important, not just with the awareness and making sure it's there, do I need an appointment ahead of time, do I need my student ID... But really working to dispel some of the misinformation out there.

Sloan: That's when you see how so many people come together so quickly for the benefit of our students, faculty and staff. There has never been a time when I've been involved in the institution when we all moved so quickly in directions together.

Peters: AND HERE IS THE TRUTH, WE ARE STILL DOING THIS. I THINK THAT'S ONE OF THE THINGS WE LEARNED FROM THE PANDEMIC THAT WILL NEVER TRULY GO AWAY. NOEL TALKED ABOUT EVOLUTION WHEN WE SAT DOWN, HOW HER STAFF EVOLVED, HOW COMMUNICATION EVOLVED, HOW WE ALL GREW AND LEARNED A LOT. IT'S THAT EXPERIENCE THAT GIVES US AN UPPER HAND AGAINST COVID. WE HAVE THE KNOWLEDGE, THE TOOLS, THE INFORMATION NOW TO MOVE FORWARD. AND I THINK IT'S SAFE TO SAY... WE ALL WANT THAT.

(Music)

Peters: WE'RE BACK SITTING AROUND THE CHANCELLOR'S LONG WOODEN TABLE, OVERLOOKING THE MARSHA SHARP FREEWAY. HE IS EXPLAINING SOME THINGS TO US ABOUT THE CORONAVIRUS. IT'S A PERSPECTIVE THAT OTHER MEDICAL PROFESSIONALS LIKELY SHARE OR POSSIBLY DISCUSSED AFTER 15-HOUR SHIFTS. LEAVING THE HOSPITAL EXHAUSTED, DRAINED, JUST BARELY HANGING ON SOME DAYS. GOING HOME TO TRY AND REST BEFORE WAKING UP AND DOING IT ALL OVER AGAIN. I TOLD YOU THE CHANCELLOR WAS FRUSTRATED ABOUT SOME THINGS RELATED TO COVID-19 IN THE EARLY DAYS. AND MOST OF IT STEMMED FROM THIS...

Mitchell: We weren't getting good information. We weren't getting good information, if you recall in those early months, we were getting conflicting information saying 'you know what, masks don't work.' probably every physician here was saying 'I don't get it, why wouldn't it work? If it stops droplets, it will work'. But no, for this particular virus it doesn't work, then you're told it does. All the medical professions were saying 'this doesn't add up, this doesn't make sense'. The information we were getting was very suspect and limited, it wasn't only suspect, but a lot of it was factually false and we were basing our medical care on that.

Peters: SOMETHING ABOUT THOSE INSTRUCTIONS DIDN'T MAKE SENSE TO THE CHANCELLOR. BUT MORE IMPORTANTLY, IT WASN'T WHAT HIS TRAINING HAD TAUGHT HIM ALL THESE YEARS.

Mitchell: We were treating people like this was any respiratory virus and for this particular virus, that was probably the wrong thing to do. So, we were getting people in and immediately getting them in ICU and on a ventilator and started using high flow oxygen. This, in certain people, has this weird, strong, inflammatory reaction, so when you're on a ventilatory like you would be for any other respiratory infection, you're actually getting the opposite effect. So, once we started figuring that out and we started modifying what we were doing, mortality rate went down. So, in those situations, you would like to have better help from the World Health Organization, you would like to have better help from the Chinese government, but they were holding their cards close to the vest, for reasons other than public health. Disappointing to say the least.

Peters: THE CHANCELLOR IS CLEARLY PASSIONATE ABOUT BEING ABLE TO LEARN FROM OUR PAST. FUNNEL THAT WRONG INFORMATION IN THE BEGINNING INTO A 'DO NOT USE' BIN. BUT HE FIERCELY HOPES THE FOLLOWING COVID CONVERSATION WILL CONTINUE.

Mitchell: What are the lessons? For me, as it comes to PPE, when it comes to pharmaceuticals, those aren't commodities, those are national security assets. We better be thinking about that and quit thinking about outsourcing to the cheapest places we can find because it's a cheaper way of doing it, that cost us lives early on in this thing.

(Music)

Gabby Hansard, Student: I'm honestly not sure, don't know if we ever will get back to pre-covid times.

Mitchell: Once you've crossed the Rubicon, there ain't no going back.

Patrick Hughes, Vice Provost for University Programs and Student Success: Among all the lessons I've learned in the pandemic, there is a really strong sense for working toward goals. There's a long list of people to thank.

Joe Heppert, Vice President for Research and Innovation: The good and bad all continued to happen, but I truly think the experience really brought an understanding on what is important in life.

Sandy Scott, Student-Athlete: I'm definitely more thankful and grateful for what I have. I know what it means to have those things taken away.

Hansard: We took normalcy for granted and this pandemic got us like a slap in the face. It's in the little things.

Aliza Wong, Interim Dean, Honors College: There were joyous times, that's what made us resilient, it's what ultimately made us red raiders.

Noel Sloan, Chief Financial Officer: It certainly highlighted the value of our TTU community.

Richard Lennox, Director, Student Counseling Center: Be in the moment, listen to the wind when you're walking down the street or to class. Take time to be present.

Peters: IT MAKES YOU THINK... WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE PRESENT? TO NOT JUST LOG INTO YOUR ZOOM MEETING ON TIME... THE IDEA OF NOT JUST HEARING BUT LISTENING. IT'S MORE THAN SPEAKING BUT MAKING OUR WORDS THOUGHTFUL AND COMPASSIONATE. WHAT I KNOW IS THIS, WE WILL CONTINUE TO FIGHT THIS. THAT'S WHEN WE WILL TRULY BE ABLE TO APPRECIATE A COMEBACK FROM COVID.

(Music)

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.

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