

## **Drs. David Keller & Julie Meyers**

*David & Julie are a mid-60s couple who live in the Congress Park neighborhood of Denver. David is a pediatrician practicing at The Children's Hospital Colorado. Julie is a retired pediatrician who has served on FUSD's Faith in Action Council, co-chaired the Racial Justice Project, and follows gun violence prevention legislation. The couple has been members of FUSD for seven years, Both sing in the church choir. David has chaired the Abundance Committee, the Finance Committee and is about to assume the role of FUSD Treasurer.*

Early in 2020, Julie and David were feeling good about the church. The congregation moved back into the renovated building the previous September, and all were orienting to the new space. We had weathered the biggest risk of reconstruction, that membership attrition might erode our financial base during the temporary displacement at Manual High School and the minister's concurrent sabbatical. Choir was growing rapidly. Mike Morran's messaging emphasized the need for racial justice, and a covenant committee was incorporating that commitment. "It was kind of stunning how good things were looking," David remembers. "The church was doing great."

As a retired person Julie was trying to find a balance between all that she wanted to do and needing downtime. She was contemplating how to encourage new leadership for the church's racial justice committee.

At the beginning of February, David attended a meeting where the U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services was the keynote speaker. The Secretary spent ten minutes explaining how the country had COVID completely under control. "When all hell broke loose a month later, it was evident that officials had either been supremely [and overly] confident or had baldly lied. The previous three years of trauma had broken the government and politicized everything to the point of destroying any capacity to respond." Both Julie and David knew we were facing a huge fight with uncertain outcomes in the upcoming presidential election.

At the end of February, the couple traveled to New York and to Rhode Island to celebrate their son's birthday. Things had started getting bad in the Northeast. By the time Julie returned on March 8, COVID was heading West.

The day David returned to work in early March, his hospital stood up its COVID crisis command center, preparing for the worst, but not sure what would come. He was scheduled to speak at four pediatric meetings through the spring. Mid-March, the State cancelled all university travel. "Around then I developed a viral illness," David says, "so I became one of first people in the state to get a COVID test. It was negative, but turnaround on results took eight days then; I was barred from work for a week."

The hospital cancelled all on-site patients and tooled up for telehealth. "Fortunately, we deal with crises really well." There were bumps early on, as when the hospital discovered it had only 50 telehealth lines and spent a month acquiring another 1000. "Within two weeks, procedures were established, and we were running virtually; we trained 1000 doctors to do telehealth and started calling to bring in patients who urgently needed in-person care. We spent the month convincing people it was safe to come in."

"My job is mostly strategy, and the early crisis was mostly operational." As the pandemic drags on, more of his work has gone toward connecting with and trying to support junior faculty and staff who are burning out on the front lines.

The flow of David's work changed as all meetings migrated to Zoom. Working from home became normal, as did finishing work by 5:00 PM. At least once a week he biked into the clinic and it was eerie, but he was never completely isolated. He changed between bike and work clothes at the clinic, and showered on arriving home to prevent bringing the virus home to Julie.

At home, Julie "watched everything fall off my calendar. From a personal perspective, it was kind of nice. It solved my problem with overcommitment. Spring came, which meant that I could garden and be outdoors and that helped a lot. At the beginning, it was like being on vacation except for being terrified."

"The most immediate change was we were home, and I was cooking dinner every night. There were no nightly meetings. Our kids and their spouses instigated a weekly Zoom call. Our daughters-in-law came every week, and I was touched by that. It felt like genuinely sacred time. It was weirdly delightful in the middle of all this tragedy for so many people. I felt so sad for humanity but happy in my little bubble."

When George Floyd was murdered on Memorial Day 2020, Julie didn't feel comfortable going to the street protests. "I was torn about that, but I didn't go because we were at risk if we contracted COVID. But seeing all the young people out there was very heartening."

At the same time, David was working with a coalition in favor of tightening immunization requirements in schools. Testifying at the State House during COVID and the BLM protests was a bizarre experience. "The statehouse closed to all hearings except bills that were COVID-relevant, but they judged that the possibility of a measles outbreak amidst a pandemic met the criteria. The Legislature was meeting in a truncated session and not yet set up to handle remote testimony. The state police allowed the anti-vax people in the employees' entrance and they stood outside and banged on the hearing room door throughout. It was quite intimidating. The Black Lives Matter protest was going on across the park, and the anti-vax demonstration going on inside the statehouse were both unsettling. It looked like a war zone."

Tension escalated around the presidential election. No one was sure how the election was going to go until it happened. The length of the Trump administration had been so grueling. "I used to wonder how people can be so unethical and uncaring, but humans are good at rationalizing," David observed. "It is easy to convince themselves they are taking care of others when all they really care about is staying in power. We now should totally understand how the Nazis took over Germany."

The coup attempt at the Capitol on the day of election certification was also bizarre, Julie says. "We were cross-country skiing in Crested Butte and our phones weren't working. As soon as we got back in range, messages from our kids started flooding in."

The beginning of the Biden term came as a relief. Things were still a mess, but not having to wake each morning holding their collective breath for next egregious Trumpian thing helped.

Their financial circumstances during the pandemic were strangely disconcerting: Before COVID, their biggest expense was traveling, which skidded to a stop. The stock market and their retirement portfolios swelled embarrassingly during the crisis. Julie and David agreed "Financially we are fine, but it certainly doesn't feel good." The contrast between their own financial situation and stories David heard from patients was stark and upsetting. "The hospital has always done food insecurity screening and sent

people to an on-site food pantry if they need help. During the first six months of COVID, we stopped screening and just offered a bag of food to everyone. Most took it.” In an effort toward more equitable distribution, David and Julie sent more money to the church and into a racial reparations fund. They also donated more than ever before toward progressive political campaigns in hopes of tipping public policy toward justice.

Mandatory furloughs at the university translated into salary cuts, which David decided to view as two days per month of unpaid vacation. When the lockdown eased enough to permit trips between counties, the pair took long weekends in Crested Butte or Steamboat Springs, carrying their own food and renting Air B&B’s. Their riskiest adventure came in August when their son from Oakland drove east to meet them in Telluride, along with their daughter-in-law, her mother and sister, and Julie’s sister and wife. David accumulated another month and a half of vacation time through the period, which he and Julie are now using.

Julie comes from a Jewish tradition, so in April 2020 she organized a Zoom seder. They invited their kids, Julie’s siblings, and David’s (Catholic) family, and Julie sent out recipes and a Haggadah. “It let me share that piece of my life with his family, which felt really memorable.”

For David, a virtual choir opportunity with composer Eric Whitaker translated into an experience as part of a 17,000-person choir. However, “Virtual choir practices are funny. Because we can’t hear each other, it is not the same as singing together. The first time the FUSD choir sang as a group was on March 21, 2021, outside at Eric Porter’s house where he lay in hospice, when we all showed up to sing our church postlude for him. Tim Murphy started us out with our choir warm-up song. It felt so meaningful to be in one group again...,” David remembers.

Julie observes that she and David were in a good phase of their lifespan to weather the pandemic crisis: comfortably settled financially, nearing retirement, with no small children or grandkids. Both adult sons work in the tech field and were able to work from home. “I think about younger colleagues who are trying to work full time as docs and home-school young kids while worrying about medical school loans, mortgages and their future. I worry that they will be a long time getting to some semblance of normalcy.”

But even being privileged through the pandemic could not fully insulate its sting. Julie notes, regretfully, “Our son and daughter-in-law became foster parents for the first time in April 2020, bringing a 17-year-old into their home when her group home suddenly shut down because a staff member tested positive for Covid. Our son and daughter-in-law were amazing with her. She stayed with them for 6 months. She was our first almost-grandchild, and we didn’t get to even meet her.”

Inside their COVID cocoon, David and Julie drew strength from each other and having another person to go through it with. The loving constancy of their kids was uplifting. Singing and bicycling helped David. Gardening and knitting helped Julie. The couple enjoyed lots of online concerts, plays, and streaming Lincoln Center programs.

They found some new ways of entertaining: Zoom parties with friends. David bought an LCD projector and they watched movies on a screen in the back yard through the fall. Both managed to avoid COVID weight gain despite large expenditures on Licks ice cream.

“Going to bed earlier, sleeping more, living with less stress let me sense what eventual retirement might possibly look like,” David reflects. “I turn 65 next year, and I’ve assumed I would always go to work. But now, I can envision a time when doing work with my professional societies and church might be enough. I’m going into the Treasurer’s position at church. And I currently chair the legislative policy committee for the Colorado Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics. My big initiative is coaching young people about how to approach legislative issues that affect children. A pediatrician now serves in the state legislature, and I’ve arranged with the university to allow some residents to take a month out of training to staff her. We are punching way above our weight! We pushed a safe gun storage bill. (A pediatric resident testified on gun legislation today.) And we worked to convince teachers that we know how to handle COVID as we reopen schools. That is good work.”

Both Julie and David anticipate that it will take a while to feel comfortable being around people in a normal way after the pandemic subsides. “Little steps are helpful,” Julie thinks, “and being really respectful of other people’s comfort zones. Most of our peers are vaccinated, but we’re still not ready to eat in a restaurant, or go to an indoor concert, or sing as a group. A gradual approach is fine. And I don’t ever want to go back to same level of craziness that was my life before the pandemic.”

In April 2021, both fully immunized, the couple went to Taos and took a trip East to visit a son and David’s parents. It is a relief to move around more freely.

The trauma has been real for so many people and communities, and the pandemic accentuates the have and have-not nature of our society. It has been particularly difficult for children. “Kids are a mess emotionally. Half of the kids we see present with mental health crises, and the leading diagnosis in our ER is suicidal ideation. We recently had 30 kids on hold in the emergency room for lack of psychiatric beds. It reached such a point that when we saw a surge of kids showing up with vomiting and diarrhea, all the staff felt relieved.”

“The lingering effects of COVID on society will define the next 20 years. We are handing our kids a lot of work: Beyond the virus and its lingering effects, all the attendant mental health issues. Climate. Political dissonance. A fragmented country. Racial reckoning. Yet I am optimistic. I have a lot of faith in the younger generation. Both of our kids are embracing it. The hospital residents are amazing. Their optimism is inspiring. But we’ll have to be supportive of them.”

When it comes to returning in-person to church services, David and Julie see it as critical to hang onto virtual options and configure the sanctuary for online streaming. They hold out some hope that the dual options might permit us to return to a single service on Sundays with a heightened sense of cohesion.

Julie sees urgent need to renew and enhance our social justice mission, to make it an even bigger part of our community. “That will be hard because we lost ground and engagement with the isolation. But the need is greater than ever, and we need to bring new energy and vision to the social justice space.”

David is pleased that we enter our next chapter with the church financially stable, a sizeable endowment against rainy days and four months operating capital in the bank. “Stable finances give us time to figure out how to put ourselves back together and maintain a sense of urgency and mission. We will need to outreach more to young families, rebuild RE and build on our connections to the community. I think we are ready to do all of those things for the congregation and the larger community.”

## **A Pandemic in 6 Words**

*(In September 2020, amidst COVID, wildfires across the West, and an explosive election campaign, Julie solicited her family to describe the pandemic experience in six words. Here were their thoughts.)*

Julie:

Happy/sad at the same time.  
Good-bye hot summer, hello winter isolation.  
Knitting my way through the pandemic.  
Madame DeFarge: knitting while we unravel.

Benjamin (older son):

COVID, heat, smoke - one horseman left.  
Zoom meetings are getting real old.  
I finally put up that shelf.

Joshua (younger son):

Nine hundred thousand people have died.

Lorraine (daughter-in-law's sister):

Crowds of people make me anxious.  
I worry about my old people.  
I could have hiked much more.

Helen (daughter-in-law):

My mom still on her journey.

Hildy (sister):

Air of COVID, smoke, and ozone.  
Can science prevail? It's not clear.

Peter M (brother):

Come back to school. Maybe not.  
Wait, is it Saturday, or Tuesday?

Sam (niece's husband):

What will we learn from this?