

Scott Bookman

Scott Bookman is in his 40s and lives with his wife April and their sons Hollis (10) and Joe (8) in the Park Hill neighborhood of Denver. Scott and April joined FUSD in 2019 and April volunteered with the Women's Homeless Initiative at the church. Scott lived out the year of 2020 in his basement as COVID-19 Incident Commander for the State of Colorado and Director of the Division of Disease Control and Public Health Response for the Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment.

Scott Bookman acknowledges that he has not yet had an opportunity to do much reflection on the impact of 2020. For him, the storm has barely died down 14 months after it blew onto the scene.

While all his professional life – experience, skills, and education– seemed to prepare Scott for the moment that would be COVID, he had barely sunk roots into soil before their sturdiness was tested. Scott had been a paramedic for 25 years and earned a Master's in Emergency Management. For seven years he served as EMS chief for Denver before moving to Telluride to run a rural health center. The family returned to Denver three years ago and brought a new member into the family two years ago. Scott joined the congregation at FUSD on Memorial Day weekend of 2019. At about that time, he was tapped as Director of the CDPHE Public Health Lab, first as deputy and then director of the Office of Emergency Preparedness and Response. On February 21, 2020 he was asked to serve as Incident Commander for the State's COVID-19 response. "Two days later I was briefing the governor, then the congressional delegation, then the White House. Before I knew it, I was directing a full-on COVID response."

Looking back, Scott remembers his first inkling of COVID-19 came on Dec 31, 2019: "I was sitting in my office at the state lab and saw a tweet about pneumonia of unknown etiology in China. I shouted across the hall at my deputy to come see. She remarked, *this is how it begins*. That was when Covid started for me." No one knew at the time what import it would have or how it would unfold, but it feels remarkable to remember that first moment of foreshadowing.

From this pivotal moment, the year new got quickly and increasingly intense.

Scott's family had a perspective on this pandemic that few families did. They were aware much earlier about its potential import, experienced sooner the sharp intake of breath and tightening around the chest. "In mid-February, we made the obligatory trip to Costco to stock up on what we thought might be essential. (It has been interesting lately to go back and see some of that, the cases of children's Tylenol!) Then, all the sudden I was gone. I went from relatively normal hours to working 16-18 hours a day and 7 days a week. This is not a part-time job. In some periods, I literally worked through quarantine. It was like being deployed from my basement."

That disruption to the family was the worst loss from COVID for Scott personally. From that abrupt beginning, it went to school being cancelled and everybody at home, the plight of so many essential workers in the COVID era. "My wife was left alone to home-school two kids, one who began with high needs and another whose needs grew over time. The disruption to my family, the trauma of my role as it impacted my kids and my wife, those were our real sacrifices."

The scope of Scott's job in relation to the pandemic was formidable. He was responsible to direct and oversee testing, surges, epidemiology, public health data, and immunization. While his roles with CDPHE translated to all-COVID-all-the-time, they also provided a lens for viewing other major historical events of the year. "We had to prevent or address COVID outbreaks at wildfire camps or public protests amidst civil unrest. Each is difficult enough on its own terms, but trying to prevent the spread of infectious disease adds another layer of complication.

In many ways, for him professionally, Scott says, "This has been the experience of a lifetime. It brought all my experiences, skills, and education together in an opportunity to serve in a way I never would have imagined. It felt like this was my calling, and I am grateful to have been in the right place at the right time to serve the State that I love. It is as though I walked backwards into this job."

While preparedness gave Scott tensile strength for the COVID storm, seeing his work through the eyes of April, Hollis and Joe motivated him to see it through. "If I was going to put my family through this, I knew I had better do a damned good job." Feeling that his was a just mission in a just cause allowed him to step more willingly into service.

For Scott, the work is not over. "It turns out that getting 5.7 million people vaccinated is something of a job in its own right!" Trying to achieve equity in the rollout is complicated. Worrisome variants and the prospect of a fourth surge hover in the wings. He continues to attend to work from 6 a.m. to midnight seven days a week. But he begins to see the light at the end of the tunnel and have some confidence that it isn't another train.

"We're coming out of it. Both adults in our family are vaccinated. Both boys are back in school for full-time in-person learning." Walking the dogs with April, and bike riding with his boys are both strength through the ordeal and his personal reward.

What was lost, and what was gained through COVID? Nothing about it is simple.

"We have all suffered a collective trauma over the last 14 months. One of my coworkers says, 'We've all gotten weird.' We don't know how to do human interaction as fluidly and naturally as we once did. We'll have to figure out as individuals and a society how to recover from that."

"Everyone is excited and looking forward to getting on with the *new normal* as we emerge from COVID this summer. But truthfully, no one alive has ever had to do this before. Together, we'll have to figure out how to come back from all this."

Some of the changes from the COVID year will affect our lives for the better, Scott believes:

- Telehealth is greatest thing ever, especially its impact on behavioral health.
- The fact that our parents who live in New York have learned how to Zoom and can now see their grandkids.
- The shift to hybrid work environments has reduced the environmental impact of the daily commute and enlarged the possibilities for balancing work life in many households.

- The period of introspection that COVID provided is a gift we might not have had otherwise, one that gives us a choice about how to go forward.

For Scott professionally, the year brought together a host of opportunities for developing a whole new set of skills. “Who knew I would be doing regular press conferences? Meeting, briefing, and speaking with the Governor? I’ve had wonderful opportunities to connect with the people of Colorado, the people I am here to serve, from a really different perspective than ever before.”

What do we appreciate more, what have we learned from a year stuck in our basements?

COVID has brought great learnings: That *the economy* doesn’t always refer to the impact on Jeff Bezos’ bank accounts but on people’s jobs and livelihoods. That *protecting life* includes both avoiding deadly viruses and keeping ski resorts open, inasmuch as they are drivers of local economies and provide the means for people to support their families. COVID reminded us to look at all systems through an equity lens, including making sure that our vaccine campaign calls out to people of color and people living in poverty.

For our church and all our communities, Scott thinks, “We need to reevaluate what we need from each other. Are we a society or a bunch of individuals or clans? We need to redefine our responsibilities toward each other and to the greater good.” Diversions like the battles over mask-wearing (which never should have been a thing!) give us a chance to reconsider how we function. How do we move past diversion and division to become a village again? Do we really mean it when we say we value equity? Such discernment and recommitment to our principles is the gold seam that can repair and strengthen the fractures that run through our society.

As someone who has sacrificed a year of his life in service of the State and in response to this enormous threat, Scott’s greatest hope is that we emerge from this time cherishing the society and community we have and not taking it for granted as we all did before this happened.