

Crain_Bry

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Interviewer: Today is Tuesday, June 28th, 2022. My name is Amanda (Reichenbach) and I am the manager for the Tumultuous 2020 Oral History Project at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. I'm currently at Crain's Funeral Home in Anna, Illinois with Bryan Crain. We're going to be talking about his experiences as a funeral home director and owner throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Thank you so much for having me.

Bryan: Thank you, Amanda.

Interviewer: So we always like to start with the basic information. When and where were you born?

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Bryan: I was born in 1964, right here in Anna, and then grew up upstairs of the funeral home that my parents operated for many years. And it was always just a part of my upbringing and my life. And it was just natural that I went into it. I was not pressured by any means.

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I was encouraged to look at other options by my parents, and this was where my calling was and I wouldn't want to have done anything else.

Interviewer: Yeah, I'd like to talk about that a little bit. Your family does have almost 100 years of history in the funeral home business. Can you tell me a little bit about some of that history?

Bryan: Wow, it all started in 1932 with my grandparents, George, and Marguerite Crain, who were both licensed funeral directors and embalmers.

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Which was just unheard of in 1932 for a woman to obtain a license and practice. And they operated in two very small communities in Tamms and Pulaski, Illinois. And I asked my grandmother one time how how did that go over.

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Women didn't work outside the home hardly at all at that time and let alone in this line of work. And she said, "Oh, the families loved it, especially if it was, you know, their mother or wife that had passed away. They knew that a lady was going to be caring for her." At that time, in the 30s, it was so different than today.

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Because customarily the person would pass away at home. And my grandparents would then go to the home. Usually, not very many people had a telephone at that time, so much of the notifications came by the family coming to the funeral home, and, you know, all hours and saying, you know, hey, we need your services, and they would respond to the residence.

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And they would actually take their equipment, portable, and they would actually perform the embalming in the home. A lot of times, the home didn't have electricity, so they did this with flashlights, and I don't know how in the world they did it, but they did for about through the 1930s. That was the tradition unless the person passed away in the hospital.

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Then they did the embalming at the funeral home. But if they were embalmed at home, they remained at home. They would dress them and the family then would come to the funeral home and select a casket. Then my grandparents would take the casket to the family's home. Much of the time, the doorways weren't wide enough to get a casket through, so my granddad, he could have been a carpenter for a living.

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He would take a window out and where they could get the casket in and then he would shim the window back up and enough to make it secure. So then they would place their loved one in the casket, have visitation in the home. They took the equipment. They took a back drape.

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They took lamps, folding chairs, everything that the amenities that were needed to conduct a visitation. That visitation then, a lot of families would stay up all night. And they would remain there with their loved one until the day of the service. And then it was customary at that time that all funerals were held in the church. So they would go.

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My grandparents would go to the home and take that window out a lot of the time, and move the casket out, and proceed to the church and have the funeral, and then the burial. The day after the funeral, my granddad would go back to the house and permanently put the window back in for the family. So it was a lot different back then.

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And along about the early 1940s, that practice ceased. And they always brought the person to the funeral home and performed the embalming there at that time, and then we started using funeral homes for the visitation, so the family wouldn't have to host in their own home. And that's kind of the transformation during that early days. Another thing that all funeral homes offered at that time was they were the community ambulance.

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So it seems bizarre to think that you would call the funeral home for lifesaving, but that was the protocol, and that was the way it was done, other than in metropolitan areas, but in the rural areas, just about any part of the United States, the Funeral Home ran the ambulance.

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So they would change out, and they would use their hearse and maybe a service vehicle, but they would have a portable red light and then a siren. And when they needed the hearse then for a funeral, they would take the red light off and it would convert back to a hearse. So that was a lot trips, a lot of middle of the night, fast trips. They didn't have much as far as lifesaving equipment.

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They had a cot, and an oxygen tank, and blankets, and just basically a first aid kit, and a seat that popped up in the back, so that someone could ride along in the back and tend to the sick person while the driver took them to the hospital. So it was a lot different than the way it is today.

Interviewer:

And how far away at that time was the nearest hospital?

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Bryan:

The nearest hospital was in Cairo which would have been 15 miles. It's kind of midway, Cairo or Anna. And by the roads and the standards back then, probably a, you know, 20-minute trip. They didn't have the traffic. I mean, the red light was a magnetic light that attached to the bumper of the hearse that's over here in the carriage house, the 1937 one, and I asked-

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My grandmother lived long enough that I asked her a lot of questions about it. And I said, Memaw, how did you get - you know, with just that little light on the front, how did you get through the traffic to get to the hospital?" And she said, "There was no traffic back then."

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Interviewer: Yeah, I guess were cars like - did people not own as many cars as they do nowadays?

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Bryan: If they owned a car, they had one. And most people worked close to their home. So there was just not the - if they made a trip, it was a weekly trip to Cairo or to Anna to shop. And that was usually on a Saturday. So there just wasn't the congestion on the highways like we see today.

Interviewer: Wow. And how old was your dad when he joined the business?

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Bryan: Well, my dad and my uncle both grew up in it. Dad was born in 1935. And Uncle Bill was born in 1939. And they just grew up living in the funeral home. And it just was second nature to them. And they started helping out at a very young age. And back then, it was just a family operation, maybe one or two part-time employees.

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So there were a lot of times that they drove and drove the vehicles before they were even of age.

Interviewer: And at that time, you know, did your dad, you know, want to join with your grandparents or was he hoping to start on his own, with his own funeral homes?

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Bryan: Well, there was not enough to support two families out of the operation they had. It was very small. You know, maybe three or four services a month on average and then the ambulance work. And so there just wasn't enough to support everyone. So that's why my parents, Bob, and Elaine made the move to Anna and bought the funeral home here.

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And then Uncle Bill and Aunt Sharon, when he got out of school, then they went to Cairo, and opened up, and then eventually, when my grandparents retired, my uncle and aunt took over that operation from them. And eventually, it all became one.

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Interviewer: Very interesting. And it's really interesting to think about growing up right above a funeral home. Can you kind of describe, you know, what daily life was like for you?

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Bryan: I didn't think anything about it. I mean, other than to have to be quiet. Because back then, when I was growing up in the late 60s, early 70s, and all through the 70s, and early 80s, everybody had a visitation and a funeral.

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Where now we see a lot of services condensed to the same day visitation and funeral all in one day, whether it be for a person that's embalmed in a casket and viewed or whether it's cremation with a memorial service. A lot of it's condensed to one day.

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Back then, visitations would start at 2:00 in the afternoon and go till 10:00 or 11:00 at night at the funeral home. And then the next morning, I mean, my dad would be downstairs and have the door open at 8:00 and the funerals would not be until 2:00 in the afternoon. And it would be nonstop that people would be here and they usually would come and stay.

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So my sister and I had to be quiet all the time upstairs. And we had - and my mother helped out downstairs as well. So we had ladies, a couple ladies that were just so dear to us that would come in whenever and babysit. And that was a treat because they were always fun, and we had a good time.

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And then Mom and Dad would come upstairs for supper and we'd get to see them. So they weren't away from us for long periods of time, you know, because they worked right here.

Interviewer: Do you think that the grieving process has changed a lot then? You know, because, like you had mentioned, visitations and funerals, as you said, are kind of condensed now. You know, what makes it so different?

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Bryan: I think that back then, it was that was just the way that it was expected to be. And now families are doing things. You know, they want to do something a little different. They look to us for guidance and what are our options. Some come in and already know exactly what they want. Others are like, "Well, here's what we're thinking about. What are some ways we can do this?"

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You know, we don't want to be completely traditional, but we want the, you know, community involved as well. So we're looking, you know," and that's

when we offer ideas, here's what other families have done. You know, and we just present options. What would you be comfortable with? You know, talk about it. Talk about it, and we'll plan something to make it meaningful, and something you're comfortable with.

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Interviewer: And not to kind of jump around too much with the timeline, but I am really interested in learning a bit more about Marguerite. I guess, was it difficult for her to become certified as an embalmer? Or you know, where was she able to get her education?

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Bryan: She actually went with my granddad to Chicago to Worsham College of Mortuary Science. He had enrolled right after they got married. And so she went, and at night, then when he wouldn't be back from class and had all of his notes written out, she transcribed his notes, typed them.

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And to earn income, then he was a good notetaker, she was good at reading his handwriting, and typing, and a very fast typist. And so then they actually - she transcribed notes for other students as well, so that they had their notes typed. And when it came time for their tests, and then eventually their national board certification, it was all right there neatly done, and she had it in a binder for them.

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And so that's that. And then that's how she got interested. The next semester, she enrolled.

Interviewer: They sound like very clever people, your grandparents.

Bryan: They were unique. My grandfather had the charismatic personality. My grandmother, she was very business minded. And so between the two of them, it was a good combination.

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They could hold everything together and make the community comfortable and for such a unique and personal service.

Interviewer: And then going back to talking about, you know, your own experiences growing up in the funeral home, can you kind of describe the layout of the home at that time you were growing up?

Bryan: Well, the living quarters were upstairs so they were completely separate.

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They were connected by a stairway from the living room downstairs into the office. So if my sister or I needed Mom or Dad, we could just come down the stairs and stick our head through the door at the office. And they were - somebody was around. We had an older gentleman named Dolby Keesler. And he was like a third grandfather to us.

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And so if they weren't around, he was there. And he'd take care of us. And so that was - after the big thing when I was, you know, four, three, and four years old, I can remember my Aunt Mary, who wasn't really my aunt, but she took care of us. She would hold me up in the window out front as the funeral was getting over with and we'd watch it watch everybody go out.

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And we'd know then that they were leaving to go to the cemetery. And she had to answer the phones at that time. So we had phones in the apartment upstairs. And so she had to answer the phones and then but also our job, we'd go downstairs. And they had the bier that the casket was rolled out on to the front was always then left at the front.

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So our big thing, our fun time was that she'd set me up on the bier and roll it back into the chapel where it belonged. And that was always a fun time. And then we'd kind of tidy up and everything and so that when they got back from the cemetery everything would be in order. So move chairs around. I mean, I carried chairs from the time I was, you know, four or five years old.

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Interviewer: And what was the layout of the funeral home part?

Bryan: Much like it is today. And the apartment sets right above, so the living room, kitchen, bedrooms, everything, every sound you made, if you weren't quiet, they could hear a thump downstairs, so the music couldn't be too loud.

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Carpet, you know, that was one thing. I can remember hardwood floors, but it wasn't long, you know, after my sister and I were, you know, rolling around upstairs that the carpet went in to help absorb some of the noise downstairs. So I would listen through the vent for the heating and air conditioning system. I had one in my room that I could open up and listen to the services or the visitations and see how, you know, things were going.

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Interviewer: Very interesting. And so you said that there was like a chapel. And then did they - was that the same place that the visitation would take place?

Bryan: Yes, the visitation, funeral. And they had room for two at the same time. So which that's not done anymore because at that time, you know, it was they had the evening visitations.

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They didn't really have a choice but to have two, but now they can stagger them. You know, we do that because that way the family has the entire facility to themselves.

Interviewer: Do you still have that second chapel area, or has it been converted to something else?

Bryan: It's converted to a memory area so that the family can display pictures. We have a TV in that part of it so that they can have a memorial video.

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And that's kind of an informal area that maybe they're not that comfortable being in the room where the deceased is present and they can be over at the side. So that way, it gives them a choice.

Interviewer: And those specific stories you told me kind of about being held up over the window and putting the - did you call it - it's a bier?

Bryan: Casket bier, yes.

Interviewer: Casket bier. I've never heard that word before.

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Bryan: It's a glorified cart, but it's decorative and solid, so that way it's-

Interviewer: That makes sense.

Bryan: Right.

Interviewer: And, you know, kind of talking about your parents. can you tell me a little bit more about them? Like, you know, what were some of the ideals that they raised you with?

Bryan: Well, to be mindful of the needs of others, to be a friend.

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Because small community, I mean, they knew the majority of the families that they were serving. And they would be, you know, a lot of times, longtime families that anytime they had the need would call on our family to serve them. And I can remember many times during supper time, you know, we'd just sat down to eat, and the phone would ring, and it would be an ambulance call.

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And my dad would have to go. I mean, they would have to go at a moment's notice. That was the thing. It may not have had the lifesaving equipment. But there were times that they could get someone from here in town. They could respond to their home and have them to the local hospital within 10 minutes.

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So it was a thing that Dad always kept clothing to change into, you know, in the bedroom that he could just jump up, and grab, and go, and respond. That was his thing. As quickly as possible.

Interviewer: Would your mother typically go on those calls with him?

Bryan: No. Doby, my third grandfather, and then later on Max Miller, who was a longtime funeral director here.

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One of them would go and mom would stay because someone had to answer the phones. So mom would stay with us. It was a little different. My grandparents would have somebody live with them, kind of a nanny because they didn't have anybody else. It was just up to the two of them to respond on an ambulance call and it took two people.

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So there were two ladies that, you know, were grown but not married and had families yet that lived with my grandparents and took care of my dad and my uncle, and they were just precious people and considered family, you know, and stayed close up until they passed away just a few years ago.

Interviewer: And what was Anna, you know, as a city like? Well, is it considered a city or is it a town? I don't know the specifications.

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Bryan: A town. It's not a village. It's a town but not a city but it's stayed stable as far as the population, 4,000 to 5,000. Back in the day, though, I could take my

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bicycle or Big Wheel, whatever I was riding or walk up and down the street. It was a lot like Mayberry.

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And everybody, every store down all the way to the four-way stop and around the corner - there was a Dairy Queen around the corner. And that was kind of a rite of passage. When I was about six years old, I was allowed to walk to Dairy Queen and get a treat by myself. But that wasn't just walk and get it and come back.

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Every shop along the way, was, you know, local people that, you know, knew and they were friends. And so they all looked out for me along the way and knew every one of them. And so a lot of times, I'd go to Dairy Queen, but I wouldn't be back for an hour because I'd have to stop and talk to everybody. And it was just a charming place at that time.

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You know, I wouldn't think of letting - you know, by the time I had children, I wouldn't have thought of letting them go that far at that age. But it was a close-knit community.

Interviewer:

That sounds wonderful. And you know, what would you want people who don't live in Anna, what do you want them to know about it, you know, that, you know, people from an outside perspective may not know about the community?

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Bryan:

Well, it's probably best known for the Choate Mental Health Center, which back in the early days was Anna State Hospital, and that's why the town thrived because it had a large employment, you know, with the state hospital. We had other industries as well. Anna was home to Bunny Bread.

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And so that was a major employer. Florsheim shoe factory had two locations. Transcraft Trailer company started here. And a lot of offshoot businesses. Because of Transcraft, then Holcomb welding became a major manufacturer for Transcraft.

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So Anna Quarries, which is still thriving today. So a lot of our industry base that's all changed as things moved out of state. And the mental health, in that

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regard, it's changed a lot to where there's not the thousands of residents at the mental health center.

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They've been relocated into community living arrangements. And so there's a lot of the CILA homes in the community instead of where they're all in one institution.

Interviewer: Very interesting. And this might be sensitive, so please, we don't have to talk about it. But I think one thing that - when you like google it, one thing that comes up is its history as formally a sundown town. Is that something that you've experienced?

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And if you feel comfortable talking about. Again, you do not have to.

Bryan: It was always very Caucasian. Now that's not the case now. I mean, we have a large Hispanic community in Cobden, which, you know, is five miles away, and it's probably not as racially diverse a community still.

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But we never as kids, I mean, just talk about my friends growing up, nobody ever discussed that. It was never even - and our parents didn't discuss it that it was that way. So we never saw any outward sign of that. So I think that's just the outside perception.

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But the people here, it's never been that way in my lifetime.

Interviewer: And then, I kind of want to ask about Southern Illinois in general because it's such a - in Illinois, you know, you kind of have Chicagoland, which has a dense population. And then you get to Southern Illinois and there seems to be kind of like a difference in the culture.

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I guess, what do you appreciate about Southern Illinois that makes it, you know, part of Illinois? I don't know. Do you get what I'm kind of asking?

Bryan: Sure. The rural area, the hospitality, the friendliness, it's the fact that you know your neighbors. Your neighbors would do anything for you. You'd do anything for them. It's just a sense of community.

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And anytime - even to this day, anytime there's a need in the community, that a family has a hardship, a medical hardship, the community comes together and has, you know, a fundraiser to help them out, and just a lot of things like that, that I don't - they do that in the cities, but it's more in the form of like a soup kitchen, I guess, where it's strangers.

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And this is where, you know, you know everybody.

Interviewer: And the landscape is beautiful, too.

Bryan: Right. It's totally different. The hills and all, yeah.

Interviewer: I was called a flatlander when I was down here before. And it's not something I've ever heard before, but I liked it. Anyway.

Bryan: Yeah. Once you hit along about the Illinois 13 corridor, it's just it's a complete change of landscape.

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Interviewer: But from talking about you some more, you mentioned that you always felt that calling to become a funeral director. Can you kind of tell me about what it was like when you realized that's what you wanted to do?

Bryan: When I was 11 was when I said this is what I'm going to do. And that's when, you know, Mom and Dad didn't want me to feel like that that was expected by any means.

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So they, throughout my years in school, encouraged me to look at other things. They said there are easier ways to make a living. You don't have to be on call all the time. You can have your weekends free, you know, if you do - you know, they presented different ideas like to be an architect or to be in different things. So I looked at all of it.

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But it was I watched them and how they served the community and their friends. And I thought it would be an honorable way, and to be a part of the community, and make a fair living, and the hours never bothered me. I've never known anything different. So but don't get me wrong, I do take time off.

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Interviewer: And actually, I should have asked where your dad went to mortuary school.

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Bryan: In St. Louis. I think because it was closer. From the time between my dad going to school and my uncle going though, the St. Louis College of Mortuary Science closed. And so my Uncle Bill went to Chicago to Worsham where were my grandparents went.

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I went to SIU because by then that program opened in the 70s. And so I went in 1986 was the year I graduated from there and it was closer to home. They had a really good program. And so and that's what - SIU is what has brought so many people to this area. There's so many people in Southern Illinois that relocated from Chicago, Northern Illinois.

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They went to school down here, fell in love with the area and stayed and made it home.

Interviewer: So was SIU always, you know, like a big state school? Or was that something that really began kind of during that time when they added the mortuary science program?

Bryan: That actually began in the 50s and 60s when Delyte Morris became the president of SIU.

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And that's when SIU went from just kind of a teaching college to a full-fledged university. He expanded it, and just did all kinds of great things, and, you know, brought people from all over to this part of the country that they might never have seen had it not been for going to school there.

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Interviewer: And how do you think that - I know you mentioned your son is in mortuary school now. So what do you think has changed about, you know, the schooling to become a mortician and funeral home director?

Bryan: The schooling, a lot of the things have remained the same, the same exact thing as it was when my grandparents were in school.

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The National Board has not changed a great deal, although the profession has changed considerably. If I were to rewrite the curriculum by the way things, the trends now, I would put some courses in pertaining to hospitality management because we've gone from undertakers to event planners.

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The family wants to have a celebration of life so we pull it all together for them. And it's a lot like planning a wedding, except you've got a short amount of - a lot shorter amount of time to do this. So usually a week or less. So I would put in some things like that. I would even put in, you know, hotel management.

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Because you're involved in scheduling and things like that and scheduling staff to cover different services.

Interviewer:

You know, kind of talking then about the changes, well, the changes that haven't occurred in the curriculum, but in the field, you know, what would you say are those biggest differences between, you know, when your grandparents opened to your dad to you?

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Bryan:

Well, one thing is the gender. My grandmother was the only lady in her graduating class. And now 60%. It may be a little higher than that, but at least 60% of mortuary school enrollees are female and there's a special place for them. And we've always had the female touch from the time that my grandparents started.

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Because my mother and my aunt were both involved. They were not licensed embalmers, but they were involved and helped on all services. And so there's always been, and it was carried over to where my wife is very involved and helps out. We have two female funeral directors so that way it's a good mix.

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The women bring a special touch to it that us guys, sometimes we just don't get it.

Interviewer:

And, you know, as we're starting to get into the conversation about pandemic, I'd like to know a little bit more about, you know, what the day in the life of a funeral home director was like before the pandemic?

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Bryan:

Well, I always say that you really can't plan a day. They just happen. You never know when the phone's going to ring, and what's going to be on the other end of the phone call, and, you know, when you're going to be called into action. I mean you know when you get up in the morning, well, I have a

service at 11:00, or I have a family that, you know, we had a call the day before. I have a family to meet with at 10:00 this morning.

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Or, you know, and who's going to meet with the different ones. So in that regard, then some days, it's you wonder, wow, what's happened. There's nothing going on. But with the advent of the way things have changed so much, there's not the small mom-and-pop operations. The days of a single location operator, a one-man operator, those are going by the wayside.

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Because just it's impossible physically for one thing to do that all by yourself, to be the responder that gets up at 2:00 in the morning, that handles the preparation of the remains, that meets with the family, conducts the funeral. If you have several at one time, that's impossible for one person to do a family justice when they've got, you know, three or four services.

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So you have to have the - and just the cost of operating the facilities, the equipment to keep your rolling stock, your vehicles up to date, to keep up to date with continuing education, things like that. So what we're seeing is the big trend is the regional operators like ourselves where we operate nine locations, and we can float staff between.

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If they're not busy at one location, but another location is covered up, we can call staff into to assist, and that way, we better serve the families.

Interviewer: And when you were graduating from mortuary school, did you plan on coming back to work with your dad?

Bryan: Oh, absolutely, I wouldn't have gone anywhere else. You know, my dad and mom both taught me a lot. And Max Miller as well taught me a lot.

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My grandparents were still involved. You know, they weren't physically involved in it, but they imparted a lot of advice. And they were able to see me operate and offered suggestions, which I took and appreciated. And my uncle and aunt, everybody has been - it's been a family effort and family support.

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I was the only one out of my generation, the third generation to go into it. But I'm proud that, you know, I've got my children, which there's three involved.

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Interviewer: So I guess I should ask. How many children do you have?

Bryan: Four.

Interviewer: And three out of the four.

Bryan: One, the son-in-law is involved, of the oldest child, and then the two youngest sons are involved.

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Interviewer: So the Crain family business will continue.

Bryan: That's their plan. They said we're going to carry it on. So I'm looking forward to - in 10 years, we'll be a hundred years old. So at that time I'll be 68. And I can fully hand over the reins at that time and say, carry it forward.

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Interviewer: And, you know, can you kind of tell me a little bit about your philosophy on, you know, if funerals are important and why? And I say if to make it an open-ended question. But I'm sure you're going to say they are important.

Bryan: The important thing is remembering, you know, recognizing that a life was lived.

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And that has changed as our society has changed. Ninety years ago, families, most of the children, if they were larger families, they'd have, you know, out of five or six children, most of them stayed within the area. And so they were closer knit. As time evolved then and families got smaller, there'd be only two or three children.

[0:43:34]

And they may get their education and move away. And they only come back to visit Mom and Dad on the holidays, and you know, see them, you know, less, and so without the extended family nearby, then a lot of times, when the parents get elderly, they move them away, so that they can take care of their needs.

[0:44:00]

And in that case, there's been more instances where someone's brought back for funeral and burial. And so we deal nationwide with, you know, we have to be able to make a contact. Okay, you know, we're in Florida. Mom just died. What do we need to do?

Crain_Bry

[0:44:26]

And so we make arrangements, you know, to get mom's body flown back, or cremated or whatever it is that they're wanting done, but we can - you know, one call from anywhere in the United States, and we can help them with whatever their request is.

Interviewer: That's pretty amazing.

Bryan: And that's what - middle of the night, you know, you just never know when that call is going to come in.

[0:44:56]

Interviewer: Did your grandparents, did they see how much the business had changed? You know, were they able to see what a widespread reach that you guys have?

Bryan: My grandmother lived to be 95. And she got to see a lot of the changes, a lot of the expansion. And so at that time though, we were not as we - were at five locations, I think.

[0:45:31]

Cremation had not really started to take hold at that point. Now it's at least half of all deaths are cremation. So we operate our own crematory. We have a human crematory, as well as a dedicated pet crematory. So we've started, you know, that. That's something they would have never seen coming.

[0:46:03]

So it's been - so we've just tried to evolve as the trends and the preferences of the families. Our big thing is that if it's available, and the people want it, we try to provide it.

[0:46:28]

So at this point, there's not a whole lot that we don't - that we can't - you know, there's - I don't know anything that somebody could walk in and request that's legal, that we couldn't provide, whether it be a traditional funeral with burial with a headstone to a mausoleum. We operate three cemeteries as well. And so we have mausoleums. We have cremation gardens. So if they have a - once they're cremated, if they want a traditional marker, they can have that.

[0:47:02]

Or there's the niches, things like that for permanent memorialization. The most important thing is to have something, a marker of some kind that says

you were here. If not, a lot of people say I don't care, I don't care, just scatter me to the winds. I don't care what they do with me. Just cremate me and scatter me.

[0:47:30]

And maybe the family that's here now doesn't care either. And that's fine. We don't - you know, that doesn't mean anything to us. But future generations down the road, you know, well, what about my great grandmother, and where - you know, where is, you know, so it's important to have some sort of permanent memorialization that says that you were here.

[0:48:00]

I've seen, you know, a lot of people go back and do grave rubbings off of the rubbings off of old headstones. And you know that they never crossed paths with the person who's there because they died like in 1890. And so there is a human need to know, you know, where we came from, and where our ancestors are.

[0:48:29]

Interviewer: Beautifully said. Did I interrupt you? I'm sorry.

Bryan: Oh, no, I need to get a drink of water.

Interviewer: Oh, yeah, go ahead.

Bryan: Obituaries, you know, that's a big thing. That's changed so much. People always depended on the paper. And you'd read the paper to see who passed away, and when the services are, and, you know, with fewer and fewer papers, and it's so expensive to place an obituary, it's a lot of that's gone to online now.

[0:49:02]

And so one thing, you know, with our website, we have a feature on that, that most funeral homes do. That's obituary notification. So whenever we upload a new obituary, whoever's on that list automatically gets an email. And they can see who has passed away and they can read the obituary. We have a Facebook page. They can share it from there. And that's how - that's really how the word gets out now.

[0:49:31]

We still have a local radio station that reads the obituaries on the local news and that's very rare anymore that that's done.

Crain_Bry

Interviewer: It's really interesting, the evolution. But starting to talk about the pandemic, you know, moving into 2020, did you guys like have any big goals or plans for that year?

[0:49:59]

Or what were those past couple years like for you?

Bryan: My dad and I had always talked about every time that something would come out. I'm just thinking about during my working life. AIDS was the big thing when I got out of mortuary school. You know, that was - and there were all kinds of - you know, a nurse got stuck with a needle and got infected.

[0:50:32]

You know, funeral home professionals, embalmers are at risk. If you come in contact with the blood, you know, you can get AIDS from that. We got through that. And always, you know, it doesn't matter what the person dies from, we're going to serve the family. And if they want embalming, their loved one will be embalmed, where they can have a proper goodbye and be able to view them when at all possible.

[0:51:05]

So we went through the AIDS scare. And during that time, my dad took on all the embalming of anybody that had AIDS. Because his attitude was I'm the oldest embalmer on staff.

[0:51:27]

So if I get it, at least, you know, I don't - you know, he didn't want any of the younger ones to be exposed and to get it. So the concern at that time was, you know, okay, so we know this person had AIDS. But he said, the thing that you don't know is the little grandma, that she went to the nursing home and got last night, may have had a blood transfusion six months ago.

[0:51:59]

That was before testing for the blood transfusions, and she may have it, and nobody knows it, just from situations like that. So we just treated everything with universal precautions. So but dad and I had talked about, you know, there would be all these scares of a - I think, let's see, swine flu, avian flu.

[0:52:30]

All types of things there were, you know, in our journals, professional journals that we'd receive, we'd read articles about, you know, epidemics, pandemics. And we had many discussion about it that, you know, wow, what if something

does come out that, you know, not only will it be a challenge because the sheer number of deaths that you're going to have from it, and then your own staff could be affected and be out sick?

[0:53:02]

Half of them could be sick or have died. And so here you're going to have to be dealing with mass casualties. So we had talked about it as far as how to deal with it. So when this came about, it was not just something that we had, you know. We had actually had discussions and dad didn't live to see it.

[0:53:30]

But we'd certainly talked about it and kind of made some - had some ideas of what to do. So that day came. I mean, we had the first call. And the hospital actually, when they called us, they said, "Well, we have a family that's requested you." And they said, "But first of all, we need to know, will you accept a COVID patient?"

[0:54:00]

I said, "Well, absolutely." We knew this was inevitable. So sure. So from that point, I took the lead that my dad had done back during the AIDS scare, and so I took over the handling the transfer and the embalming of anybody that had COVID to prevent the younger funeral directors here from being at risk.

[0:54:31]

So that went on for the better part of 2020 until late in the year when the vaccine came out and then the other embalmers felt comfortable handling them.

Interviewer:

And was there, you know, guidance from the journals, or anything that, you know, gave you an idea of how to take precautions to avoid getting COVID when you were embalming, or what was that process like?

[0:54:57]

Bryan:

Oh, it was extreme as far as the type of - you know, you had to have the protective gear which was going into shortage, the chemicals and everything, spray down every surface, every possible surface of contact. Since we have multiple locations, if we had a COVID death, we would make this particular room at this facility was - we had it all just partitioned off.

[0:55:32]

So nobody else was to go in. And we handled everything that way. And then any non-COVID deaths would be embalmed at one of our other locations by

the other embalmers. So from the time that that person was here, we just kept them - you know, everything contained and isolated. So and we just didn't know at that time what, you know. Was it airborne, blood borne, surface borne?

[0:56:02]

I mean, it could have been anything. So we just made every possible precaution that we could.

Interviewer: And so kind of talking about those beginning dates of the pandemic, for example, March 9th is when Governor Pritzker declared a disaster proclamation. March 11th is when the World Health Organization declared COVID a pandemic.

[0:56:30]

And then it was shortly after that, that March 15th the bars and restaurants were ordered to close to indoor dining, and March 20th is when the stay-at-home order was put into place. Do you remember what it was like hearing all of that news for the first time?

Bryan: Oh, it was devastating, absolutely devastating. We operate, my wife and I own and operate a restaurant as well.

[0:56:57]

So it was affected, you know, and where a lot of times carry out only was limited. As far as the indoor dining, we had moved the chairs out. We had limitations on - the limitations on gatherings was the hardest thing. Because at that point, families were not allowed into the hospital or nursing homes. And so all of a sudden, you know, grandma is in the nursing home and had been having a family member visit almost daily.

[0:57:32]

And then all of a sudden, nobody's coming. They see no one. And then out of that, I think a lot died from depression. And then to have to tell our families, you know, well, you can only have ten people, you know, at the visitation, well, what kind of visitation is that? Most families, there's well over ten people.

[0:58:02]

So we thought, well, this is for a short time so we can offer to hold their loved one in our care until things open back up. And it was 15 days to flatten the curve. And I said, well, I bet it'll be 30 days. Let's plan on 30 days.

Crain_Bry

[0:58:29]

Well then 30 days came and went and so were like, well maybe 60 days. So we did. Some families said no, we'll go ahead, and we'll just do what - you know, we'll have ten at a time come through, and then we'll have a graveside service. Others said no, I want to wait and have a public funeral when things open up, and they never did really open up in the state of Illinois.

[0:58:58]

And meanwhile, you go across the state line into Missouri, which we have a funeral home in Cape Girardeau 30 miles away. So they opened up in a matter of, I think, 45 days in Missouri. And so we were able to offer - and there was - the infection - the interesting thing was the infection rate in Missouri was no higher than it was in Illinois.

[0:59:29]

So there was no reason to drag this out like was done in Illinois. So we were able to offer to our families, well, you do have this option. We can hold the services in Cape Girardeau, and there's a large facility, and there's no limitation on numbers, and you can have your public funeral there, and then we just come back over here for burial. So a lot of families opted for that.

[0:59:58]

I mean, we were well into in December of 2020, and we were still having to move services to Cape Girardeau. So we were probably the only funeral home in the state of Illinois that had that option though. So what's heartbreaking is that majority of the families still had to have their grieving in private and a time like that is when you need your community. You need your friends.

[1:00:31]

Interviewer: Excuse me. Sorry. I'm not the one doing the talking but let me see if I can get this cough drop. Did a lot of families choose the option for Cape Girardeau?

Bryan: A good number did and the turnout was good.

[1:01:02]

And we were just blessed to have that option available to offer. To some families, no, that's too far, and you know, so but at least it was something we could present. I mean, we had outdoor visitations. You know, we even held a visitation in a park, a community park, and used the pavilion, or picnic building in the park.

Crain_Bry

[1:01:34]

Turned that into a funeral chapel and the family was able to have a drive-by visitation. They stood out and everybody drove through. We had-

Interviewer: I'm so sorry. I just need a moment.

Bryan: Oh, the drive-thru in the park was really, really neat.

[1:01:59]

And the family came up with the idea, and they said, "Mom always liked to be outdoors." And so we set it up to where they could even view. We had the casket open, and the flowers displayed, and everybody could drive through. We had a page they could sign and get a memorial card. And then they just drove by and talked to the family and the family spread out, talked to everybody that came through. And it was just really, really neat.

[1:02:30]

And you know, you have to get creative and we tried to be creative. And this family had just a tremendous idea on that. It was very well done.

Interviewer: After that family did that, did more families follow suit? Or was that kind of more of a onetime thing?

Bryan: That was a onetime thing. But we were able to offer it at least from that point forward.

[1:03:01]

Interviewer: And, you know, it's funny. Sometimes during interviews, I'll discover something about, you know, the person, and so I didn't realize that you guys also owned a restaurant.

Bryan: Right. That's my wife's family have a gas station and tire business, and we expanded the gas station into a convenience store and turned into be a popular restaurant. So that's been from 2018 till now.

[1:03:32]

So that's been a whole other set of challenges with supply chain issues and labor shortages.

Interviewer: Is it you serve like local specialties there?

Bryan: Yes.

Crain_Bry

Interviewer: And so kind of just looking through my outline, you know, we've covered a lot already.

[1:03:57]

You had mentioned, you know, that Missouri didn't quite have, or, you know, had about the same amount of COVID cases that Illinois did at that time. Did you notice at all an increase in families that were coming to you guys, or was it pretty quiet in the beginning of the pandemic?

Bryan: Well, there was probably a 20% increase overall, I think, from COVID in general, and the side effects...

[1:04:30]

...the isolation that then lead to other causes of death from depression to possibly substance abuse, things that - just from people being isolated. It, you know, initially started out the deaths were primarily those in nursing home facilities, but then eventually, you know, carried over into the community as well.

[1:05:00]

Interviewer: And what do you think that, you know, not being able to have the services in a bigger capacity did for the process of grief?

Bryan: I think it disrupted the normal grieving process because part of going through it is the support of family and friends and in a timely manner.

[1:05:32]

And so some delayed the services for up to a year. And that presented a set of challenges itself just to keep track of what we have coming up. And then that's something that, you know, at least the family got to memorialize their loved one later on.

[1:05:58]

But it was very difficult and difficult for the families to deal with. And then they had to go back home and be isolated and just be alone in their grief. Just the most heartbreaking story was an elderly couple that I knew them very well. They had been moved to a long-term care facility, oh, three years before COVID hit.

[1:06:32]

And they were in the same room, husband, and wife together. One had Alzheimer's. The other one was in beginning stages of dementia. And so when the lock - all the way through 2020, the family couldn't go in and visit

them. And this was in Illinois. They couldn't go in and visit them. They would go to the window and wave.

[1:07:03]

And the parents were inside and the dad just kept waving his arm come in, come on in, come on in, and they never could. And they're on the inside and they don't - could not hear as far as to talk on the phone and didn't understand, well, why won't our kids come in and see us.

[1:07:28]

And so then in January of '21, they both passed away just a couple of weeks apart. The family never did get to go in and have time with them. And they said it was terrible. It was just like, you know, we would go and visit. We did everything we could. We'd go to the window. And it was just like we were going - it was like, you know going to the zoo where you have to look at them through a glass."

[1:08:02]

And they said, Mom and Dad just never - they never understood." And they didn't die from COVID. They were elderly, up in years, but just, you know, I wonder. I'll always wonder if it was the depression, you know, that just finally sunk in, and they just couldn't take it.

Interviewer: That's heartbreaking.

Bryan: And I think there's a lot like that.

[1:08:27]

We had a couple of families I know of that their loved one was in the nursing home, and then started going downhill, and they were placed under hospice care. And one family in particular moved their mother home once she was on hospice, so they could be with her. So that was great that they got that time together and got to talk to her and be with her when she passed.

[1:09:01]

Interviewer: Those are really the heartbreaking stories of the pandemic. What kind of emotional impact did that have on you? I mean, I'm sure you're used to death at this point. But seeing it in this way, what was that like?

Bryan: Well, it's just heartbreaking. I mean, these were our friends, friends, and some family.

[1:09:30]

And it's just, it's hard to hard to - you know, it's hard enough to lose someone under normal circumstances, and then you throw in the isolation, and it's just, it would just be so hard to take, hard to watch.

[1:09:58]

But they were able - you know, at least by that pint, they could have their public visitation and funeral. And they said, we're glad to finally get to spend some time with Mom. We hope that she understands now why we couldn't come in and see her.

Interviewer: So you had mentioned, you know, in the beginning, you, you know, did some postponing.

[1:10:27]

How long, you know, were you feasibly able to, you know, keep the deceased bodies without - I'm not quite sure how the embalming process works nowadays, you know?

Bryan: Right. With embalming and then subsequently refrigeration, which we have ample space, we were able to keep some for three months. There was a period of time in 2020 that opened back up for like - went from 15 to 50 people.

[1:10:56]

So we took that window of opportunity and said, hey, we need to do this during this. You know, now that it's opened up, let's not wait because it could lock back down. And so we just would have, you know, 50 at a time to go in. And that's difficult to, you know, be a host and a referee and count. And we just, you know, tried to spread the chairs out or even take the chairs out of the chapel in a couple of instances.

[1:11:32]

So that people would know, hey, this is a passthrough. We would announce it as a passthrough visitation. Come by. Pay your respects. Show your support for the family and leave because you're not supposed to sit around and gather, you know, for an extended period of time, so at least in those cases. And when the weather got bad here, as winter was coming on, I'm like, I'm not going to force people to have graveside only...

[1:12:00]

...services out in the extreme cold where you're going to have people get pneumonia from that. So we would do a passthrough during that time. So we had to, like I said, get creative and do what we had to do.

Crain_Bry

Interviewer: Is it standard for people to have meals with their funerals?

Bryan: Oh, yes. That's afterward.

[1:12:29]

And so that went from, you know, where the churches couldn't host a large crowd, families would gather at their homes. And in Chicago area, I know it's customary to go to a restaurant, and so I assume that had to be a tradition that was not followed through with in a lot of cases.

[1:13:00]

Interviewer: And were you guys able to do any investing in like streaming technology? Like did you ever put your services online for people who weren't able to travel?

Bryan: That was a positive that came out of all this, to stream the services. And that's a service that we've, you know, continued to offer because it was so well received. And there's just times that it's just not possible for someone to get here.

[1:13:29]

And they may - it may be, you know, just a few people. But we found that the viewing of the services, that was in the hundreds, and there were probably people that may have come to visitation, but we're not going to come back for the funeral, but because it was on Facebook Live, went ahead and watched it. So that turned out to be a good thing. And we've continued to offer that and will, as far as I know, indefinitely, put that as an option.

[1:14:05]

Interviewer: I'm not quite sure if you - you don't really have to answer this if you don't want to, but was that an expensive investment, you know, since that you have so many funeral homes or do you kind of pass the equipment around?

Bryan: Well, all you need is a phone and a tripod, and go on Facebook Live. The only complication with that is if there is music.

[1:14:32]

And if we're going to stream it, we can't have music in the content of the service because Facebook has a deal where they will mute that. And so you have - you know, you don't know when they're going to unmute. So we just have to get creative and we'll play our music before and after, so that they can have the content. And that's the most easily accessible at this point.

[1:15:00]

Most everybody can get that on Facebook. There are other streaming options. We have done Zoom. But again, this is open to the public. It has the option on there that if the family does not want it left up indefinitely, they can say okay, the funeral is today. Leave it up until tomorrow night. Take it down tomorrow night. Everybody will have seen it by then.

[1:15:30]

Interviewer: It's always nice to hear about the positives that have come out.

Bryan: Right.

Interviewer: And I know you've kind of already talked about you being the one to prepare the people who had passed from COVID or who had COVID. I'm interested to know if people were forthcoming about, you know, the deceased having COVID, or is that something that you found was difficult to get that information?

[1:15:57]

Bryan: Well, initially, the healthcare facilities would be upfront and say, Mrs. So and so is COVID positive. As time went on, that got lax, and it just, they didn't necessarily tell us. So it was a matter of few months, and we get to our first call where they said, you know, and we just happen to see on the tag, COVID.

[1:16:26]

So again, you just have to treat everything with universal precautions, but that was during - and I knew the healthcare professionals were understaffed. and overwhelmed, and overworked, and it just got to where that it's seldom that it's revealed. Sometimes we just asked are there special circumstances? And then then they'll say, oh, well, by the way.

[1:17:00]

Interviewer: And did you guys ever run out of the protective equipment? Or were you able to keep it stocked, even if there were some delays?

Bryan: We got nervous, but we never ran out because of having multiple locations. We have each embalming room fully supplied. And so that way, if we ran low at one location, we could pull from another.

[1:17:31]

Again, the advantage of having more than one place.

Interviewer: Yeah, that makes sense. And I believe it was - I wish I had written this date down on this outline. I think maybe it was in May of 2020 when FEMA started

Crain_Bry

giving aid to people who would had passed from COVID for funeral expenses.

[1:18:00]

How did that work with you guys?

Bryan: FEMA, the only way they would authorize it would be the family had to apply. So we provided the families with the phone number, with a little card that had the phone number, the hours. And then they'll probably want a death certificate and a copy of your funeral bill. When they ask for that, just let us know.

[1:18:31]

The first few that applied it was they called me back and said that was so easy, I can't believe I was talking to the federal government. And they would then let us know when they got their check. And so it's gotten to be a little more tricky, a little lengthier I think, just because of the sheer numbers that they're dealing with.

[1:18:57]

But again, we provide that once we know and it has to state on the death certificate either as a direct cause or related to COVID-19.

Interviewer: And one thing that I'm also interested in knowing about is, you know, the process of -- I don't know if this is the right word -- but getting a death call. You know, did that change much when, you know, the pandemic started?

[1:19:30]

Bryan: Usually whether it be a healthcare facility, or a hospice nurse, or a coroner would be notifying us. You know, they would just - they call and those calls come in 24/7 So we try to answer our own phones. We have phones at our home. So afterhours it rolls over to our house.

[1:20:00]

If we don't answer it within three rings, then our backup is it goes to an answering service who then will page the on-call director. So that way, it's the response is timely.

Interviewer: So, you know, because you guys have grown so much, does that mean that you're not always on call, and you don't always have to wake up in the middle of the night, or what's that like?

[1:20:29]

Crain_Bry

Bryan: Well, I answer the phone usually, and then or my wife does, and then we'll call whoever's on call, we have an on-call rotation between five directors, so that way, nobody's on call two nights in a row, or, you know, they get their weekends, and they get their evenings. So if they're up last night, they probably won't be up tonight. But when that call comes in, a majority of the time, we have to - you know, we have to go then.

[1:21:00]

Interviewer: And so when you were the one who was solely preparing the people who would pass from COVID, would you then be kind of on 24/7 call for those specific ones?

Bryan: Right. I wouldn't be on. I mean, we couldn't go anywhere, on vacation anyway, or go out to eat. There wasn't anything else to do. So yeah, whenever that came up, I would be the one till about November.

[1:21:33]

Interviewer: So what changed in November?

Bryan: I think that's when the vaccine came out and so several of our directors got the vaccine and felt comfortable handling the embalming for COVID.

Interviewer: I think that one of the dates that I have for the vaccine was - I think it was in the middle of December when they started rolling out.

[1:22:00]

Bryan: Okay, well that - yeah, along about then. It was right before the holidays, so that everybody kind of jumped in and did.

Interviewer: Did anybody end up contracting COVID that you know of?

Bryan: I don't know of a case where any funeral director contracted it from a deceased individual. Of course, who knows how - if they caught it, who knows how they contracted it?

[1:22:28]

Unless there were a massive number of people that contracted it at a gathering, you know, that's about the only time I've ever known of it to be traced anything. And the one thing, once a person is embalmed, it was safe. There was no risk as far as viewing the individual.

Interviewer: Was that a relief?

Bryan: Well, that's been the case with any contagious, you know, disease.

Crain_Bry

[1:22:58]

You know, the embalming, you know, takes the - and that's the primary purpose for embalming is to protect the public health. Secondary is so you can have a viewing.

Interviewer: I'm learning so much simply about, you know, the process. And with the - you know, you mentioned that 20% increase. Did that have an impact on your staff and just kind of stress levels?

[1:23:30]

Bryan: Oh, my gosh. Yeah. I mean, it took a toll on everyone. And just not just the - just constantly it was, you know, not two or three calls a day, but six or eight. It was just back-to-back, and it was just everybody was just on edge and checking each other, you know.

[1:24:03]

Oh, we're having each other's back, making sure we got everything done. You know, just to keep up with the death certificate filings and things like that, that were important, and getting everything done in a timely manner. So we really - you know, some people may say sarcastically, well, it was a boon for your business.

[1:24:29]

Well, that's not the kind of boom I ever want to see. You know, that was just a - I hope to never see it again. And 2021 was just as bad. But at least during that year, we were able to - it was opened up and we could have funerals again.

Interviewer: How big is your staff?

Bryan: There's about 30 of us between full and part-time, and that's with cemeteries and everything involved.

[1:25:03]

So they all saw an uptick, but at the same time, not too many people took a vacation either.

Interviewer: And kind of then talking about - do you want to pause for a sec?

Bryan: I'll just look and make sure.

[1:25:29]

Crain_Bry

Interviewer: So I'm interested in just with the - we talked about how to say it, but now I'm going to mess it up, Cape Girardeau. How big is that business in a normal year? Like was it a big ask, you know, to move a lot of the Illinois funerals there? Or was it manageable?

Bryan: It was manageable. We just had to schedule. Sometimes, you know, well, this particular day is not available, but this day is.

[1:26:00]

Interviewer: And I was doing some reading just about Missouri's different - the way that they addressed the pandemic, and, you know, I talked about the way Illinois announced the stay-at-home order March 20th. Missouri did it April 3rd. It was extended to May 3rd, but they started their first phase of reopening May 4th. And then second stage began in mid-June, which was quite a different response than Illinois.

[1:26:32]

What are your thoughts? Do you think that the political landscape of Southern Illinois is more similar to maybe Missouri? Or yeah, what are your thoughts on those?

Bryan: Absolutely. It is. It's much more similar. Culturally, we're closer to Memphis than we are to Chicago, by far. So it's just a different climate at this end of the state.

[1:27:00]

It was just very, very controlling, very draconian, as far as the - and the ruination of a lot of businesses, and restaurants, and, you know, what was considered an essential business versus a non-essential. Well, who is the government to say what's essential? If that's how a person makes their living, that's pretty essential.

[1:27:32]

And you know, meanwhile, the big box stores, Walmart, for instance, was allowed to remain open, and that is absolutely a petri dish of germs. So I just felt like the whole thing to be, the way Illinois handled it, very hypocritical.

[1:28:00]

Interviewer: Did a lot of local businesses in Anna, were they unable to reopen?

Bryan: Some smaller ones that were on the verge, that were struggling anyway, that was the final straw, you know, and some just got fed up, and tired of fighting it.

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[1:28:28]

And those that survived it and have continued now are dealing with problems with the - and the whole labor shortage thing, that was another thing that, you know, people were paid to stay at home. And so how do you find - how are you going to compete with that? Private sector can't compete with that wage wise for what they were getting, a bonus for staying at home, which is absolutely ridiculous.

[1:28:58]

To this day, there's still this labor shortage, and people don't want to work, or unless it's under certain conditions. And so it's really created an environment that's going to be tough for the private sector to recover from.

Interviewer: Have you experienced that as both a restaurant owner and a funeral homeowner?

Bryan: Not so much on the funeral side because it's a different scenario here.

[1:29:28]

There's, you know, people with - and the work ethic and all, and the licenses that they have to, you know, maintain, and keep up, and I think it's more of - it's a calling, you know, where other things, whether it be the restaurant or other things are just a job to some people. We have dedicated people at both though.

[1:29:57]

Interviewer: Do you think it's different in larger urban areas than it is in smaller towns where you would know the owner of the business?

Bryan: Oh, I think so. Yeah. It's more personal in the smaller communities. But I really can't attest to the larger communities like that. So the largest community that we serve is Cape Girardeau, or Carbondale, Marion, Murphysboro.

[1:30:28]

Interviewer: And I looked at the population size of Cape Girardeau. Is it like 30,000?

Bryan: Thirty-seven, 37,900.

Interviewer: Is that the largest of those ones?

Bryan: Yes, it is.

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Interviewer: Okay. And, you know, we've really talked very broadly about just the pandemic and we talked about the summer of 2020. And so it wasn't really until June that Illinois moved into phase three, which allowed restaurants and bars to open for indoor seating that was limited.

[1:31:05]

Did things start to feel normal again a little bit for you guys?

Bryan: Not really because it was still a limitation of 50. So we're - you know, it's hard to - you know, a lot of families, 50 people is just the direct descendants, the children, grandchildren, great grandchildren.

[1:31:35]

So there was still challenges. And it's the thing about whether it be funeral homes, churches, whatever it may be. Once the people get accustomed to doing it a different way or doing less, like not going to church, but watching it on online, a lot of people never go back to the way it was before.

[1:32:02]

So it has permanently altered the way some families will memorialize and the way that they do a lot of things.

Interviewer: And the Illinois mask mandate went into effect in April, the end of April. Is that something that you guys had to enforce?

[1:32:30]

Bryan: We could put a sign on the door that was put out by the Department of Public Health. And most of the time, then we had masks available for those who didn't have them, and most of the time, that wasn't an issue.

Interviewer: And then in that summer of 2020, did you guys begin to feel delays with backups and supply chain or did that not really start until 2021?

[1:33:03]

Bryan: Everything was delayed, everything. If you're going to run short, you better get your order turned in. We were even - we're still experiencing it on granite for monuments. They're having trouble getting, you know, people to load the trucks, to engrave. There was even a stencil shortage, the stenciling that they put on the headstones before the design is blasted.

[1:33:34]

At one point every quarrier in Elberton, Georgia was out of stencil. They had the product there, but they couldn't produce it, and nobody could get stencil.

it's just and COVID must have hit the plant for those where the stencil was manufactured, and then they were behind. Once they get two weeks behind, it takes a year to get caught up.

[1:34:03]

Imports, granite imports, you know, that's a major delay, up to a year on a lot of that, and we're still feeling that effect, and I don't know. I don't know what to expect, if a year from now, if it'll be back to normal. I just don't know

[1:34:27]

Interviewer: What about with the chemicals that are used for embalming? I know that some fuels experienced delays with, you know, those chemical components, not necessarily for embalming, but just in general. Did you guys experience that or was that pretty timely?

Bryan: It was pretty timely. They kept up on that, thank goodness. But we had enough of a backlog that if they hadn't I think we would have made it.

[1:35:00]

But we just don't like to depend on that as far as our reserves.

Interviewer: I interviewed yesterday, a pharmacist and, you know, he talked about how they really didn't experience much of a shortage with medicine. And, you know, he attested that was probably to the fact that, you know, it was a public health concern if they would have been short.

[1:35:28]

So do you think maybe that's why, you know, these chemical-producing factories, were able to, you know, stay active is because it was very important to public health?

Bryan: Could have been. I mean, they may have worked extra shifts, working to keep up. Yeah. And casket manufacturers, that was a big thing. We had, as you see here, the displays. We could not necessarily use this and say, you know, we will get that exact one.

[1:36:00]

We would have to say, pick your first choice, and then pick your second choice, and maybe even a third one, and we're going to have to see what we can get. Because so much of it was being shipped out to the east coast, where the deaths were even higher. And so that was draining the supply from the Midwest. And so we would have to check with our warehouse. Well, they

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come back and say, well, we have, you know - you're going to have to go with plan B.

[1:36:34]

Interviewer: Were they typically understanding? Or did you have to kind of navigate the different emotions that people experienced?

Bryan: Oh, everybody was great, I mean, very understanding because they're dealing with it in every aspect of their life. And so we had no issues there.

[1:37:01]

I'm just not - I don't like to have to tell a family, you know, here's our only option, you know. I like to be able to give them options.

Interviewer: With the caskets, are they starting to - are they less delayed now? Or is it still-

Bryan: They're getting back to caught up as far as inventories. Yeah.

[1:37:29]

Interviewer: And in the autumn of 2020, it was a presidential election year. And so the United States in general was full of high tensions on every side. Did you feel like the virus had become politicized?

Bryan: Well, by the way that different states were enacting their rules, yes.

[1:37:58]

And then, you know, there would be particular political figures that would be seen, you know, in a public, in a gathering without a mask, but yet they were mandating masks, you know, for the taxpaying voters. So yes, it was. I felt like the whole was a control play. Not to diminish the reality of the virus.

[1:38:31]

I've seen what that does to the human body. And that's not anything to make light of but I felt like it was a crisis that was taken advantage of in a political way.

Interviewer: If you would have had that control, how would you have - you know, what kind of mitigations would you have done for the pandemic?

[1:38:58]

Bryan: Well, I would - to keep things reasonable, which I think what we saw in Missouri was reasonable. The infection rate was no higher there than Illinois

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and they were open. They were open for indoor dining. They were open for funerals. I see what some of the restaurants in Illinois had to do to have outdoor dining and the expense that they had to go to.

[1:39:29]

And it was sad that they had to - you know, a restaurant that's marginal anyway, and then to have to go to this expense to have this elaborate outdoor set up that's for a short time just seemed completely unnecessary.

Interviewer: And did you notice that COVID began to - the cases began to rise, you know, in that Autumn?

[1:40:02]

Because I know initially, the numbers were relatively stable in the beginning. Did they begin to rise in the autumn and winter of 2020?

Bryan: The weather did not seem to affect it. So we had different months that it was higher. And then early '21 seemed to be another spike and then the fall of '21 we saw a spike.

[1:40:33]

Interviewer: Yeah, excuse me. And then going into the winter, how did you spend your holidays in 2020?

Bryan: We gathered. Our family gathered.

Interviewer: What are your traditions?

[1:41:00]

Bryan: We have a large gathering at our home of, you know, with the children, and their spouses, and grandchildren, and parents, so aunts and uncles. We gathered for Thanksgiving, and for Christmas, and for birthdays, and we didn't really stop on that.

[1:41:29]

Interviewer: And then it was in December 15th, I think is the day that they started rolling out the vaccine to healthcare workers, long-term facility, or long-term care facility staff and residents. And then, you know, by the beginning of 2021, they, you know, had their rollout plan for, you know, social workers. What were your feelings on the vaccine?

[1:41:56]

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Bryan: My feelings on it, it's a personal decision that they have to be comfortable on whether they get it or not. And the only thing I questioned on it is it's the first dose, then the second dose, then they went with the third and fourth. Well, just how many doses are you supposed to get? And people that have been vaccinated still get it. Apparently not as bad and less likely to be fatal.

[1:42:29]

So if that's what, you know, everybody needs to - I think it's always going to be with us, unfortunately.

Interviewer: Are you comfortable sharing your personal view on if you got the vaccine or not, just for the sake of the interview?

Bryan: Right. I had my blood tested and I had the antibodies. I have no idea when I had COVID.

[1:42:59]

But I did and I have the antibodies. So apparently at some point and didn't know it. Asymptomatic apparently. And so I have that checked every six months.

Interviewer: And after that time, do you still carry the antibiotics?

Bryan: Yeah. I'll find out in another month. I'll let you know if I still have them. Hopefully so.

[1:43:30]

Interviewer: But I know you mentioned that, you know, some of your staff, it was after they were able to get the vaccine that they were comfortable starting to take care of the disease COVID.

Bryan: Right.

Interviewer: And was that a relief for you to not have that stress?

Bryan: Absolutely. Absolutely. And seemingly though, the risk is out there amongst the living more so than the dead, just like with anything.

[1:43:58]

Interviewer: Yeah, I mean, I think they started to realize that COVID was transmitted through the air more than anything than surfaces. Did that like kind of also take some of the pressure off of you guys?

Bryan: Well, it did. But we never have eliminated the hand sanitizer in the facility. So I think that's probably good practice, regardless.

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Interviewer: And just, you know, kind of looking over 2020, did just the effects of the pandemic, not necessarily even it directly, did it impact, you know, your aspirations for the business?

Bryan: It changed with so many things and that where we were just in survival mode. And usually we have a community education program where we host seminars, lunch and learns, and that type of thing, and we haven't started those back up yet.

[1:45:01]

Because we don't - you know, I think it's okay now and we could. It's just we've waited though because we just don't want - we don't want it to look like that we're trying to promote a large gathering and, you know, drum up business.

Interviewer: Is that a concern you ever thought you would have?

Bryan: No, I never did.

[1:45:29]

But so the last thing I would ever want would be for anybody to, you know, get sick after having attended something, you know, with us. So hopefully, we will be back to that before too long.

Interviewer: And, you know, in the summer of 2021 because of just the widespread nature of the vaccine, Illinois did move into phase five.

[1:45:58]

Did that allow you guys to start having more than 50 people?

Bryan: Right. Yeah, at that point, it was fully open. But I mean, people were back to church by then. You know, we weren't - I was not going to stand at the door and count. It's whatever. We kind of let the families decide. You know, they would say, "Well, do you require masks?" I'm like, "Do you want masks? How do you feel about it?" You know? "Well, we don't want people to have to."

[1:46:31]

And I said, "I think anybody that wants to wear one or feels more comfortable is going to have one anyway and wear it in." And so it's kind of a personal choice. If they feel like they're immune compromised and need to do that, you know, fine. But if the family says, well, you know, well, we don't want to have to wear one, then that's fine.

Crain_Bry

[1:46:59]

Interviewer: And were you able to reopen your restaurant then? Or were you able to do it earlier?

Bryan: We did earlier. Yeah. It was a lot of time, in the early part of it, it was carry out only. Then but yet, it was also a gas station, so they could come in and pay, or they could come in and get a gallon of milk or a drink. So it was just such a gray area and all that it was not shut down for very long.

[1:47:30]

Interviewer: And did that summer also start to kind of increase the number of funerals with the people who had postponed for so long or had that already happened?

Bryan: We're still having services from during that time period. Yeah. There's been delay because of travel schedules. We're going to be home the third week of July. Can we plan it for then?

[1:48:01]

Interviewer: And what challenges started in 2021 that were a result of the pandemic, though not necessarily because of the spread of the virus?

Bryan: Well, I think the supply chain issues with the labor shortage was what was really noticeable. And that just kept getting even worse through '21.

[1:48:30]

Interviewer: And have they somewhat subsided now? Or are they still - some of them, are they still intense?

Bryan: Some are still intense. Just like with any other line of work, we're facing issues. Parts for a vehicle, I mean, just to get the vehicle repaired. We've got a van. If a van goes down, instead of having it repaired in three or four days, you may be three or four weeks waiting on a part.

[1:49:00]

Interviewer: Is that pretty painful for the business? Or do you have more than one?

Bryan: Well, fortunately, we have backups.

Interviewer: And 2022 has brought about other challenges like inflation. Has that impacted the business?

Bryan: It has. It has, but at this point-

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And there was just article that came out over the weekend on Fox News about the funeral industry was trying to absorb the increases and not pass them on to the consumer, and that's something that, you know, we're trying to do as well. Hopefully, this is temporary. So keep our fingers crossed.

[1:49:57]

Interviewer: And you had mentioned that, you know, at the beginning of 2021 was that spike and then again in the fall of 2021 with the rise of the delta variant. In August of 2021 is when the FDA announced approval for the Pfizer vaccine, which was then called Comirnaty, but I think most people still refer to it as Pfizer. But that did lead to different vaccine requirements for teachers and school staff.

[1:50:29]

And then in September, President Biden announced vaccine requirements for employers with a hundred or more employees, and then the option of weekly testing. Is that something that impacted Anna very hard?

Bryan: Some of the employers. We don't have too many employers over a hundred people so it wasn't as noticeable here.

[1:51:00]

Interviewer: But it's worth noting that, I think at the beginning of 2022 is when the Supreme Court overturned the vaccine requirement for employers with more than a hundred employees. So I thought that was just interesting to mention, you know. I don't want to say one thing without bringing up the other part.

Bryan: Well, we wondered if it was going to trickle down to, you know, 50, and then 15, just like the gathering limitations, but anyway, thankfully, that was all rescinded.

[1:51:34]

Interviewer: What were your thought processes when these requirements came out?

Bryan: It felt like that it was wrong to, in such a short period of time, and with so little - you know, there's research.

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But at the same time, you know, to put people's livelihoods at risk, just, you know, saying you have to do this in order to be employed. So that was - I had a really hard time with that. I was glad I was not put in the position to have to implement any of it.

Crain_Bry

Interviewer: And then, you know, kind of getting to the end of 2021, you had mentioned that in 2020, you guys were able to celebrate as a family.

[1:52:32]

Were you able to do the same in 2021?

Bryan: Sure. Absolutely.

Interviewer: And then in early 2022, the Illinois mask mandate ended March 3rd, so that I think, to a lot of people signaled perhaps the end of the pandemic. What were your thoughts at that point?

[1:52:58]

Bryan: Well, hopefully so. Hopefully, it is. I mean, I think ten years from now, you'll still see some people wearing masks in public, and then there'll be some that are still - you know, may revert back to some of the limitations. I think things have changed a lot. I think it's changed some people that got used to being in, that are staying in.

[1:53:28]

They got used to having their groceries delivered and it's just a lot of people are scared. And it's going to be - it's going to be tough to overcome and get it back if it ever does go back to the way it was before the pandemic.

Interviewer: What do you think are some of those biggest changes in our society?

[1:53:58]

Bryan: I guess the whole idea of the stay home and the lockdown. That was something I never thought I'd see in this country. And, you know, there's such a thing as personal responsibility, and I felt like that it was just - it was being dictated that you do this, and you do this, unless you're essential. You know, that's the whole thing that-

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And with being locked down, then people get used to not ever getting out and it just changes the whole mindset on whether you're going to follow along with it or whether you're going to be your own person and fight for your rights.

Interviewer: Do you think that the pandemic has sort of deepened some of the divides in our society?

[1:55:01]

Crain_Bry

Bryan: I don't have the answer for that. I know during the time that you would go to the store, and they had arrows, you know, directional arrows, so you go this way, and I would be just in a rush, and one time went in, and went the wrong way.

[1:55:30]

And I got the nastiest look from somebody that was - you know, pointed to the arrow, you know, and it's like, okay, Mr. Police. You know, it was just - so that type thing. I haven't noticed any of that. That was during - I think everyone would just under so much stress at that time that the slightest little thing may have upset them.

[1:56:00]

So hopefully, we won't see that to continue, but I think it seems like people are more apt to get offended about things and hold on to it. You know, and that's a shame, because, you know, it's just, we're all in this together, and you know, you've got to forgive and forget. So little things, the little things don't really matter. And if anything's proved that, the pandemic showed how short life can be.

[1:56:30]

And we need to let go of our differences, and, you know, just love each other.

Interviewer: And you know, we're getting to the end of the interview, and just looking back a little bit, you know, did your views on the pandemic change throughout the two years that it has been prevalent?

[1:56:59]

Bryan: When it started getting, you know, through the general population, it was absolutely terrifying that, you know, somebody that in their prime of life that was otherwise healthy could catch this, and within a matter of weeks, be dead. I've always seen that with unexpected deaths from, you know, heart attack, things like that, but just, you know, something like this was just totally out of the realm of expectation.

[1:57:31]

Interviewer: And if you feel comfortable sharing, what would you say was the most difficult experience for you throughout the pandemic?

Bryan: Toward the end of '21, I lost a good friend and a cousin as well over the course of just three weeks, both young and just very, you know, very tragic situation.

[1:58:03]

And they were both fine and contracted it, got sick, had to go in the hospital on the ventilator, and in just a matter of few weeks, they were gone. So that was - you know, I don't think I could have handled it much more after that, as far as seeing it.

[1:58:32]

Interviewer: I'm so sorry for your loss.

Bryan: It was a tough time. And I hope we're past it.

Interviewer: And, you know, to talk about those difficult times, were there any things that, you know, the pandemic, I guess, lessons that the pandemic taught you that you'll, you know, take with you beyond these years?

[1:59:03]

Bryan: It just reiterates, and we see it in this line of work, but it just reiterates that, you know, life can change and just and you just never know. You never know, so make sure that you've got - that you're right with God, and right with your family, and don't leave anything undone at any time because it can all be over and just very unexpectedly.

[1:59:35]

Interviewer: What advice would you give to someone 30 years from now based on your past experiences?

Bryan: I'd say just what I just said, yeah. Don't hold a grudge.

[1:59:57]

Don't have, you know, harsh words. You just never know what the other person's going through, what they may be dealing with. And have an open heart, and an open mind, and love your family. Love your god. Love your fellow man. Treat them all with dignity and respect.

[2:00:28]

Interviewer: And, you know, one of the things I always like to end the interviews with is asking, you know, what is your vision of normalcy? You know, how do you hope to see the world calm down?

Bryan: A reset to 2019 would be - the \$2 gas and things back the way, you know, that they were.

Crain_Bry

[2:01:05]

It's going to take a while to get there, I'm afraid. But I think if it's taught us anything, you know, be kind to one another. That's it in a nutshell, I think.

[2:01:32]

Interviewer: And is there anything that you would like to add that we maybe didn't cover?

Bryan: I think we're good. I think we're good.

Interviewer: Well, thank you so much for your time.

Bryan: Thank you.