



Project: Documenting COVID-19: Stony Brook University Experiences

Title: Oral History Interview with Judith Greiman - Transcript

Narrator: Judith Greiman (JG)

Interviewer: Chris Kretz (CK)

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Summary: Judith Greiman is the Chief Deputy to the President and the Senior Vice President for Government and Community Relations. In this interview, she details her activities as one of the leaders of Stony Brook's response to the pandemic. She discusses the initial challenges of events like the Stony Brook Gala, the work of the hospital to increase patient capacity and find PPE, and the management of donations from the public and community. She also covers working with the governor's office and other outside agencies on projects such as the creation of field hospitals and the drive-through testing site at Stony Brook.

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CK: Today is Wednesday, December 2, 2020. This is Chris Kretz for the Stony Brook University Libraries interviewing Judy Greiman for the Documenting COVID-19: Stony Brook University Experiences project over ZenCastr. Judy, first of all, thank you for sharing your memories with us.

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JG: Absolutely. Happy to.

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CK: Can you tell us your position at Stony Brook and how long you've been at the university?

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JG: I'm the Chief Deputy to the President and also the Senior Vice President for Government and Community Relations. And I've been here for just about five and a half years.

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CK: And in broad strokes, what would you say your general areas of activity are?

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JG: Everything. (laughs)

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CK: (laughs) Very broad.

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JG: I mean, on the government relations side, it's sort of overseeing all government and community relations at the state, federal, and local levels. And on the deputy side, it's really serving as the president's right-hand person.

And I run a vice president's council, I oversee a bunch of areas—including Title IX and conferences and events—but mostly it's around strategic and policy matters for the president.

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CK: So if we think back to the start of the spring 2020 semester, what were you working on? What was on the radar then—before the pandemic came into view—that you're working on?

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JG: Among the day-to-day—we were in the midst of a presidential search. So Stony Brook was looking for a new president. We had an interim president in place at the time, and we were trying to bring to a close—soon—the search for the new president. That was probably one of the single most important things.

And we also had a legislative session that was right in front of us that we knew would be a tough one.

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CK: And so when do you remember first being aware of COVID? And what were your initial thoughts on it?

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JG: I'm actually not sure when I was aware of it sort of in the world. I am very clear when I was aware of it here—which was probably late, well, mid-February—where we knew something was going on in the world.

We knew that things were amping up in other parts of the world, particularly in Italy. And we had study abroad students—we had study abroad students, and SUNY [State University of New York] had study abroad students in Europe and elsewhere.

And as we rounded into the first week in March, it became clear that it was important to get those students back to the US. So the first week in March, I was actually—oddly enough—at a crisis management/leadership in higher ed/crisis management seminar for five, four days at Harvard.

And while everybody else was inside the classroom sort of wondering, What is this virus? What is this thing? Should we make changes to our commencement? Can we shake hands? That was kind of the conversation.

I was outside in the hallway almost the entire time managing the—bringing the study abroad students back to New York and to our Stony Brook Southampton campus for quarantining.

And so kind of managing the political issues around that, the logistical issues around that, etc. And from that point forward, it hasn't stopped.

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CK: We've talked to a few people on that aspect—the Southampton campus, the use of that. Can you tell us a little bit more about that? How many students actually came and what you had to do to house them?

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JG: I think, in the end, either we had space for thirty-something or there were thirty-something that actually came.

It was a complicated dance working with SUNY, working with the Office of the Governor, working with our own students and families. Almost none of the students that came here were our students. They were students from FIT [Fashion Institute of Technology] and—can't remember where else.

And you know, the Residence Life people did an amazing job of basically creating a quarantine dorm, buying refrigerators and yoga mats for every room and making sure that there were things set up that made sense for people who were going to have to quarantine for two weeks.

Remember, this was literally the beginning of it here. Nobody even understood, what does it mean to quarantine for two weeks? And, you know, sort of having to figure out all the details around how do we get their medical needs met? How do we get their academic needs met? How do we manage students who might not want to be in those rooms?

So all of that was going on, mostly [with] Student Life, but there was a political side of it which was that the local community saw this as Stony Brook bringing the virus to Long Island.

Now, the virus was already on Long Island. But their view of it was that we were at fault for bringing the virus to Long Island. And so there was quite a bit of managing with the local politicians, the local community activists, SUNY, the governor's folks—around what was actually happening and how were we going to manage it.

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CK: As it developed, when did it dawn—or when did you start seeing that the main campus would be affected and further steps would be taken?

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JG: We were already working at that moment. It just—that was the moment that I would say—that week was kind of the moment that crystallized it all. When we came to understand, okay, this is a real deal for us. And we need to—all hands on deck.

But that week—which is hard to fathom at the moment—we were still, as the leadership team, all in the same room. And we were also thinking through—well, we had the Stony Brook Gala, which is a once-a-year, major event. Usually nine hundred people squeezed into a very big event space in Manhattan. Were we going to go ahead with that? With many people that first week saying, Of course we're going to go ahead with that.

The Staller Center had its major gala—so nine hundred people in the Staller Center. Were we going to go ahead with that? And then we had women's basketball championships. And so each of these—everything else was going on in terms of what's really happening. How are we going to manage it with our students, etc. But there were these three events that were also—you can almost do a study of each day in that first week as we approached these three events.

Can we do basketball? Well, we can't cancel one thing and not cancel another thing, right? And so, how do we do that? I think that basketball made it to the penultimate game. I think we either reduced or took away the fans, and then I think it was the NCAA [National College Athletic Association] or America East stopped it.

The Staller Gala, we agreed to let the concert go on but not the pre- and post-parties go on. Because the concert—you know, there was a judgment made that you'd just be sitting in a

chair, as opposed to mingling and hugging and sharing food. The Gala we canceled but again, each day was a conversation about these things, and what was the right thing to do.

By the time we canceled the Gala, which I believe was supposed to be March 9, there was no question what was happening and everybody was—we weren't talking about events anymore. We were talking about how are we going to move our students off the campus and what are we doing.

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CK: You mentioned the team—do you want to talk a little about the people you were working with most directly, who were in the room with you there?

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JG: Sure. I think that Larry Zaccarese—now Interim Chief of Police but [then] Head of Emergency Management—and I kind of led the effort. And then there were a whole range of other players. Nicholas Scibetta, who was at the time the VP for Marketing and Communications, he was actively engaged. Legal, Susan Blum was actively engaged. Finance was actively engaged. Student affairs: Rick Gatteau, Kathy Byington. Technology: Charlie McMahon. So it was kind of like an all-hands-on-deck leadership team. We needed to get the deans engaged—

And we had again—remember, we had an interim president. So the interim president, who had been a provost—which was useful because we had an interim provost. A lot of interims happening during all this and so the interim president was a piece of that. And then over all of that was—the presidential search was coming to a head, coming to a close. And so we knew that we would have an incoming president who would have to pretty much—even though that person wouldn't be coming until July—that person would have to immediately get engaged. That was kind of another person who wasn't yet in the room but was about to be in the room.

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CK: I'm impressed. How do you prioritize with that list of issues to deal with? What were you most worried about—or what was your guiding principles as you worked through it all?

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JG: We had guiding principles which were really around—let me, you know, the thing that I haven't added yet was what was happening in our hospital.

So all this is happening, we obviously had—the rest of the country was still saying, What's going on? But here we knew the virus was here and we had a hospital that was exploding with cases. That began a roller coaster ride through the world of PPE [Personal Protective Equipment] and

management of state, local, and federal health officials and staffing and getting executive orders so we could shift medical personnel from whatever they're licensed for to other COVID-related care.

All of that was also going on that we were helping to—Larry and I were helping to manage and oversee. So how do you prioritize? Ahhhh—you just keep going.

I mean, each day we'd have certain things that we knew we had to get done. And each day we'd have twenty-seven unexpected things happening. But we did them.

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CK: So if we stick with the West Campus for a minute and with spring break looming, what were the steps you had to take to address what would happen during and after spring break?

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JG: We had to figure out, is this what we're doing? Are we at the point where we need to send people home?

And having gotten there, okay, fine, then what does that actually mean? So if we're not—we know that some of our students aren't going to be able to go home. They're international, they're homeless, they're whatever.

So we needed to figure out a way to serve their needs. That was really important. We needed to figure out a way for them to signal that they needed to stay and had to create a system for that.

Meeting their needs meant you can't just shut down your dining hall. You can't just not have student health. You needed all that stuff. And so we needed to make sure that that was happening.

You know, we needed to make sure that students were leaving, but were they leaving for the whole semester? Were they leaving just for two weeks? It was still up in the air for a little bit until kind of the very end.

And then there was a whole range of stuff around technology. So if you're sending people home forever, then what about our students who don't have laptops and devices, or who don't have good internet? There was already a lot of work being done around that, to kind of figure that piece out.

Clearly, we knew our finances were going to take a hit. Clearly, we knew that our auxiliaries—FSA [Faculty Student Association] that does our food service and other things— was going to take a hit.

And so we needed to figure all of that out. Every day was—there were a variety of committees that began to meet. There were daily—I don't know if it was eight or eight thirty—there were daily calls in the morning. There were daily calls in the afternoon. There were leadership calls at other times.

There were committees that continued to form around research because we had to shut down all of the labs at that time and what that would mean. Research around student affairs, around technology, health. So we just began to create [these committees].

And then another thing that was actually happening that was kind of the beautiful bright spot in all this was that people began to want to donate to us. So we had some people who were tasked to figure that out, and they created a system and basically took over the entire Wang Center. We had a distribution drop-off and distribution center in the Wang Center. And they had to put in place the kinds of things that we would take and who would accept them and how we would accept them. And then how we would get them distributed. Most of the stuff was for the hospital, but how we would distribute it, what we would do to make sure that the needs were being met. That was kind of a whole other piece that was happening during all this

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CK: What types of things were coming in? What types of donations?

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JG: Masks. There was a group called the Stony Brook Stitchers that began to sew masks endlessly. Lots and lots and lots and lots and lots and lots of masks that were great—very colorful.

There were other people who were working their connections to find N95s—whether they be from other countries. There were people who were donating meals—they'd want to donate meals for a shift of nurses or something. There were some sweet days. Around Easter, I think it was like some of the pharmacies—maybe it was Duane Reade or something—donated tons of chocolate. Like bunnies, you know, Easter candy—because it wasn't selling because nobody was going into stores.

A nursery donated a bunch of Easter flowers. I'm talking thousands. So the team that was managing all the donations went in front of the hospital at a shift change and just had everything laid out. And as you changed your shift, you got a chocolate basket, and you got flowers. And the staff coming out of what was really an increasingly difficult place to be—to watch so many sick people—got to come out and see this. Chocolate and bunnies and flowers. It was really nice to be able to do. So it was a wide range of things that were donated.

And then there was also—in our quest to get PPE, we also had people stepping up. So the chemistry department began to create hand sanitizer. And the folks at iCreate began to make

face shields. All this for the hospital. There's a team in engineering that was beginning to try and figure out how to do a low cost, practically parts-from-Home Depot ventilator. And they did it, actually.

All of that was part of the donation effort.

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CK: Could you talk a little more about what you were seeing at the hospital and the challenges they faced? You've alluded to some of them but a little more—

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JG: I think the biggest, obviously, was—in almost what felt like moments—they had to retool. So the governor required a mandate and an expansion of capacity by about 100%, I think it was. And so you had to repurpose areas that weren't set up for patient care. We were lucky in that we had just opened the new bed tower, and so we actually had patient rooms in the old hospital that were unused at that time. They hadn't yet been renovated. And so we were opening beds everywhere.

But PPE was a major issue. It was really, really difficult in terms of gowns and masks and gloves at different times. Swabs. There was a whole issue about getting swabs for testing. So a lot of that was helping the hospital to work all of our connections at the state, federal, and local levels.

At one point, because the gown situation had become terrible—I'm sure if you talk to Carol Gomes you'll hear about this—but the head of the hospital decided we just need to make our own gowns. And [she] found a window manufacturer who could stamp out, with a high-tech tool, gowns from plastic sheeting. And then we'd get people to sit in the Health Sciences Center and use Tyvek tape to make gowns. And that went on for many, many, many, many months.

Because she had been unable to secure the proper, impermeable gowns and she said, "I can't be in a situation where I can't protect my workers and so we'll just make our own." So that kind of stuff was happening at the hospital. Clearly, ventilators was a difficult situation for a while. Staffing became an issue.

And then the other thing that was happening— just to add one more thing—was that the governor's office decided to build field hospitals in various places, and they selected Stony Brook University. So they built five massive tents and built full-on. Took over our fields and [built] full-on, massive—the shells, the structures for field hospitals. They were never used, but the structures continue to be there.

And so that was a whole situation going on while everything else was happening that our facilities folks had to be involved with, hospital folks had to be involved with, Larry and I were

involved with, certainly. So that was sort of a daily thing for quite a while. As those were getting built, we had the Army Corps of Engineers here. We had FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] here.

So there was just a swirl of activity everywhere.

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CK: So just in terms of—my basic question is what the campus felt like, but were you jumping through all of these different areas? Were you watching the hospital go up, the field hospitals? Were you moving around campus, or were you coordinating from a command center?

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JG: There were other people who were moving around. I was in one room for almost March, April, May, June. I don't think I saw the light of day because you would get in super early and leave super late. There were no windows in that room.

So, yeah, it was kind of the command center.

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CK: How did you mind your own health during this time?

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JG: There kind of wasn't time. I mean, I hate to—I'm a pretty even-keeled person, luckily, because there were a lot of dark and difficult moments. I was going to say—I forgot something before, but obviously the hospital also had to figure out how to deal with its—how to expand its morgue capacity. And that was a whole thing as well in terms of figuring out, how do you do that? What's the best way to do that? How do you do that with the most respect?

So anyway, different situation.

I needed to keep my wits about me. Larry and I sort of both needed to be the strongest people for everybody else. So we would certainly try and be supportive of each other.

One of the things that I did was to bring tons of healthy snacks for everybody. There were very few people on campus, and there were maybe ten people in the admin building, but they'd know that there would always be food up there. So they would drop by for snacks.

So every Monday I'd snack up the room. We knew we didn't have, really, time to stop and take time. We needed to keep going.

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CK: And what about dealing with the stress itself? Did you have anything that you could distract yourself with or take downtime in pieces?

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JG: The good news is that in January of this year, I did a thirty-day yoga challenge. Every morning I was doing yoga, and I kept that up through the whole thing. So that was helpful. And every now and then, when something really crappy happened, I would take a very fast, very long walk around the campus, and that would help.

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CK: Can you say a little bit more about how you were interacting with—externally—with the different levels of authorities and governments? Just maybe some more about those relationships?

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JG: Sure. Larry mostly handled the county health folks. I was on the politician front and the state level—we had some federal politicians who were helping—but state level folks at SUNY and then the governor's office. Working with them to try and, for example, a lot of time spent trying to secure the PPE. Lot of time spent around the field hospitals.

And then a lot of time spent around managing SUNY's response because we were often ahead of where SUNY was. In part because we've got a bigger group of students, or we're just a very different campus [with] research components.

So we were often—we knew we had developed a plan to sort of figure out how to manage whatever “this” is. You know: research, taking students off campus, getting technology to them, whatever the thing was. And so we would have to work very closely then with SUNY to make sure that the plans that they were putting out, or the rules that they were putting out, didn't conflict.

So I did a lot of that.

We often needed some help with executive orders. So for example, the hospital needed to—I think I said this earlier—needed to change, needed to get some reduction in liability for docs who are licensed in one specialty, but now we need them to do COVID care.

And so there were executive orders happening like every other day where the governor would sort of say, “For the bulk of COVID time, this law doesn't apply.” Or, “Docs and nurses are indemnified from liability if we're asking them to do COVID care and that's not their usual work.”

So I spent a lot of time with folks, particularly in the governor's office or in SUNY, around those kinds of things as well.

A lot of talks about PPE.

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CK: Did that ever get any better during the course of the last eight months or so? Was there a stabilization of PPE?

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JG: I mean, it only really got better when Long Island cases began to come down. It's not that—oh, we haven't even discussed. And then there was one other thing happening on this campus which is that the state chose us to be the Suffolk County place for testing. And so there was quite a bit of work going on, and my team was working very closely with the government people around setting up the P Lot coronavirus testing site, managing that on a day-to-day basis. We also, at the same time, created a kind of pre-emergency room triage site there with our docs.

So all that was going on and there were a lot of PPE issues around that as well. But really, PPE stuff did not calm down until the cases calmed down.

And we already know that there are going to be shortages in the coming surge. So we tried, in the time that was calm, to find every possible way—on our own—to stockpile PPE so that we would be ready for a second surge and not to have to rely on the state, federal, or local governments to get it to us.

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CK: Just to go back to the P Lot—who was staffing that, those lines, those drive-in testing—

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JG: The P Lot is—so the Stony Brook pre-ER was run by Dr. Josh Miller from Stony Brook Medicine. And then the P lot testing is run by the State DEC [Department of Environmental Conservation] and DOH [Department of Health]. But Michael Arens who's on my team, Government Relations, was the liaison to the university and helped to manage. Because every now and then there'd be bumps in the road around who was paying for what and how campus property was being used and things like that. And so Michael was the go-to person.

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CK: Looking back, what was one of the more surprising sources of help or collaboration that you found?

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JG: I mean, it was—again, I have to say some of the donation stuff was just heartwarming in a lot of ways. Kids did videos for nurses and made cards that we plastered all over. So that was like, okay, there's a world out there that cares about what we're doing, and that was very nice.

You know, I think that it was—it was complicated.

I actually don't want to dive into this, but some of the partners that you thought were there at the state level were often more complicated, in terms of the partnership.

So that was difficult.

I guess the other thing I would say is that who we relied on were—this place rocked. People in Stony Brook stepped up in ways that were amazing. We needed to create—we had no employee health apparatus on West Campus, and we needed to have a health information line that our employees could call if they had questions. If they thought that they'd been exposed. If they themselves had come down with the virus. And we put that together in like 24 hours. Our student health just did amazing work and then continued to as we created testing for students.

Res Life [Residence Life]—astonishing. It didn't surprise me, actually, because I think that Stony Brook people are incredible and dedicated and devoted to what they do, but it was wonderful to see this team, this broader team of people who are here, just stepping up in every possible way.

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CK: Was there anything that you thought would be a bigger problem or issue that turned out to be not so?

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JG: Well, I think that although nobody likes Zoom, and I think the classes at the end of the semester last year weren't necessarily our best, [but] I think that they went off with less of a hitch than I would have expected. Professors pivoted in such an immediate way, and they did okay.

You know, our students got through the semester. I think I expected that to be a bit rockier than it actually was.

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CK: And just since we're still going through this—coming back in the fall, or bringing the students back in the fall, what sticks out in your mind about the challenges of that as you were planning it?

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JG: We had a very elaborate plan. We knew we felt that we could make our plan work. It had about no more than 25 percent of on-ground classes.

We knew we could take—well, we knew we could take at least six thousand in our dorms and we got about forty-five hundred. So we knew we had massive financial challenges, but the challenge really was to make sure that we could do all that and keep everybody healthy. That was our goal, was to keep everybody healthy and safe. And to make sure that our students have the opportunity to progress to degree because that's what they need.

And that they continue to stay engaged in this institution. I think we had an extraordinary plan. I think we had incredible people working that plan and we're one of—not a lot of institutions in this country who—we stayed open with the thirteen weeks of our plan that we needed to. I have a calendar on my door that shows each day that we needed to be open, and we put a red mark on it every day at five. Friday's got a smiley face, and I will donate it to the library because it's very special.

But every day we looked at that calendar [and] how many weeks we have left. What do we need to do to keep this going? And we made it. We had fewer than 100 cases over the course of the whole semester from our students. That's pretty incredible for an institution this size.

But there's a lot of planning and a lot of effort that went into making it.

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CK: Just as a summation, in case I haven't asked you a particular question—is there anything you would like people to know about this time and what you experienced during it?

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JG: Ummm— (pause). Now I'm getting emotional. It was the challenge of a lifetime, I think, for individuals and for this institution. And we came together, you know. So I mean, "What's a Seawolf? I'm a Seawolf." We were all in this, from our students, our faculty, our University Senate, our leadership, our interim president, our incoming president. We were in this and we had a single focus on the health and safety of our students, staff, and faculty. And our patients and patient care.

And you know it's, I think, remarkable—the things that we managed to do on both sides of Nichols road. And the things that we will continue to do until this virus burns itself out.

Really an incredible team of people. Every obstacle that can come before us, we jumped over and kept going. So that's what I got.

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CK: Great. Well, we thank you for all that work and for sharing that with us, and we appreciate your time today.

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Absolutely. Thank you. Thanks for doing this.
[end of interview]