

An Interview with Michael Brown

Perspectives from the COVID-19 Pandemic: Leadership and Learning in Nevada

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Each interviewee had the opportunity to review their transcript. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the interviewee. This interview features Michael Brown, Fellow for University of Nevada, Las Vegas The Lincy Institute (previously with the Governor’s Office of Economic Development), and was conducted on 7/26/2023 by Kelliann Beavers. This interview covers topics including reflections on leadership, organizational challenges, and opportunities for collaboration.

Interview with Michael Brown

Date: 7-26-2023

SPEAKERS: Kelliann Beavers, Michael Brown

Kelliann Beavers [00:01]

No, it's okay. We got it.

Michael Brown [00:07]

And I am just walking back to my car here.

Kelliann Beavers [00:10]

Okay. Well, thank you again so much for chatting with us. I'm looking forward to being able to cross paths with you here this year as well.

Michael Brown [00:18]

Yeah, next week.

Kelliann Beavers [00:19]

Yeah. It's going to be excellent to continue to learn from you, and I'm glad that Dave had the idea for us to speak with you about this project as well.

Michael Brown [00:28]

And tell me about this project.

Kelliann Beavers [00:30]

Yeah. So we coming toward the end of a couple of years of conducting interviews with leaders throughout Nevada. We've done about 80 interviews.

Michael Brown [00:37]

Oh, boy.

Kelliann Beavers [00:38]

Yes, with elected officials, with leaders of government agencies, leaders in community organizations, business, and K-16 education.

Michael Brown [00:48]

Okay.

Kelliann Beavers [00:49]

And we have learned so much, just very broadly, talking about the impacts of the pandemic, and what leaders feel they have learned about leadership, about organizations as a whole, and about

the economy. And obviously, you've been a big part of the conversations, so I'm really looking forward to being able to hear, just from you, what you feel like the experience was like.

Michael Brown [01:14]

And are these going to be archived somewhere, or is it just your background?

Kelliann Beavers [01:18]

Yes, they will, ultimately. So once we have a transcription, I'll send it to you, so that you can read it first, in case you want to edit anything or really, any changes you can make.

Michael Brown [01:29]

Okay.

Kelliann Beavers [01:30]

But we are going to archive them at the library, for the future, if people want to be able to look for them.

Michael Brown [01:37]

Am I going to be the only guy not on TV?

Kelliann Beavers [01:38]

No, we're just going to do the transcript.

Michael Brown [01:41]

All right.

Kelliann Beavers [01:42]

So I don't think we'll send the actual recordings. (laughs)

Michael Brown [01:47]

I've been the "invisible man" when it comes to photographs. And whenever they, the Review-Journal would try to find a photograph of me, they couldn't find one, you know? So, anyway.

Kelliann Beavers [01:57]

We'll have to get some headshots of you when you get set up here.

Michael Brown [02:03]

Yeah.

Kelliann Beavers [02:07]

Okay. So the first question is very broad. As a leader, how did you see your role during the pandemic? And you can also answer this like since the pandemic. However, you view yourself in terms of the response to the pandemic.

Michael Brown [02:25]

Initially, I felt like the captain of the Carpathia. Carpathia was the ship that heard the Titanic's distress signal and had to race over there to try to help. Because it was a Friday night, and there had been rumors of – there have been news stories about the pandemic, and the governor's office had called a week earlier and had asked to borrow Greg Bortolin to help the school superintendent with dealing with many different preventive measures on the pandemic. Greg was going to do public relations and community relations. And we were continuing to hear about China – it was Friday the 13th, and I was up in Carson City, and it took more for – I don't want to say, "comic relief," or what's that – "black comedy." My friend and I decided to watch the movie *Contagion*.

Kelliann Beavers [03:38]
(laughs)

Michael Brown [03:42]

We sat there Friday night, and we watched the movie, *Contagion*, and it scared the heebie-jeebies out of me.

Kelliann Beavers [03:47]
I bet.

Michael Brown [03:51]

And when it ended, I could hear my state cell phone, upstairs, ringing. And I went up to my bedroom, and got my state cell phone, and it was for Michelle White, the governor's chief of staff, and she says, "We need you in the governor's office by ten o'clock tomorrow morning." It was a Saturday then.

And so my friend, she had already gone to be downstairs, and I had to leave her a note (laughs) that at six a.m. – "Returning to Las Vegas. Pandemic issue. Will call."

Kelliann Beavers [04:29]
Wow.

Michael Brown [04:30]

My trip back to Las Vegas – went straight from the airport to the governor's office, where we began the process of developing the response to the public health emergency. And which then we went shortly thereafter to a press conference; the governor, myself, and Senator Douglass Morgan standing there closing the Strip. And I just realized that everything at that moment had changed and that everything we hoped to do, as an administration, had changed. And that I was now – my little agency was now in the relief/response role.

And so, I had to quickly learn about some stuff. So I quickly got the book on emergency management, and I got a book on the 1918 pandemic, and over the weekend, got as smart as I could get with that. And then until May of that year, I was part of the Senior War Cabinet, dealing with everything in the pandemic, and had deployed most of my staff to somehow

working on the pandemic. Because the governor's office in Nevada's very small – they don't have much staff.

And then we came through the summer, and I got put on the Lead Committee and reopened. And then as the Lead Committee did its work, then I tried to refocus back into economic development. But Rostron I think was the name of the Carpathia's captain. But it was just like, what do we have to do in the short period of time we have? And for me, it meant a bi-weekly meeting with the National Guard over the Emergency Response Center. It was truly a once-in-lifetime experience, that I'd never, ever, ever get to repeat.

Kelliann Beavers [06:37]

Yeah, it's so intense how basically, the mission and purpose of what you were doing was so close to the need to do it like this, but also you were doing something so different.

Michael Brown [06:49]

That left me, two years later, completely exhausted. And guys went off to fight the Viet Nam War, and they came back to a country that wasn't sure the war should have been fought and got no recognition for what they did. And I kind of empathize with that, not that I'm looking for accolades, but oh, gosh, it changed everything.

In the small world department, I was best friends, and remain best friends with the daughter of the woman who invented the vaccine.

Kelliann Beavers [07:31]

Wow.

Michael Brown [07:34]

And so through Dr. Kariko, the Hungarian woman – that's been in the press a lot – her daughter's one of my closest friends, and I know her parents really well. So I kind of also had a slight inside track as to what was happening there. Anyway, it was a defining experience in life for me, and I have tried to forget a bunch of it. It was a Friday night, and we were trying to determine how many intensive care hospital rooms we had in Nevada, we had a spreadsheet, and we weren't sure if we were double-counting. We had all of the hospitals on it and all the different kinds of care rooms, and how they could be expanded – because the 1918 pandemic hit furiously.

And we ended up calling, at like 10:30 at night, the head of the Nevada Hospital Association, who was just an absolute hero in all of this, to double-check our reading of the spreadsheet. And we had read it wrong, and we had far less intensive care units than I thought we had in the state. That was the only time I was ever scared during it was that we had far less rooms than I thought we had.

And then I sat, and I worried about – they were projecting 40,000 deaths in Nevada. And I kept looking around at the governor's staff, who were millennials, and it's like none of these folks have experienced death in their lives – in their life experience of what's this going to be like. And we had a chart on the wall where we started to record each death as they started to come in.

Kelliann Beavers [09:36]

Wow.

Michael Brown [09:38]

So that's a quick reaction to your question.

Kelliann Beavers [09:45]

Thank you, and thanks for sharing those details at the end. It really helps give a clear picture of what was unfolding during a really intense time.

Michael Brown [09:54]

Yeah.

Kelliann Beavers [09:55]

And thank you for your response and leadership. It's amazing to hear that your immediate impulse to go and learn more about the 1918 pandemic, and really educate yourself about the relevance is just really wonderful to hear someone sort of explain the way that happened.

Michael Brown [10:13]

Yeah. There was a book that I read, I think it was called *The Great Plague, or The 1918 Pandemic*. It was written in 2005, and there was an introduction to it by Leavitt, who was Secretary of Health and Human Services for George W. Bush. I think his line was something like "No one would – I could look it up – but it was like "No one will take planning for a pandemic seriously, and then afterward will say, 'You never did enough.'" And it had like three pages or really solid recommendations as to what you should do – it was written in 2005 – 2006 – as to what you should do in a pandemic on a public policy basis.

And speaking unvarnished truth, (laughs) unvarnished, difficult truth, to get people out of their comfort zone, and make them uncomfortable was like first and foremost. And Governor Sisolak stood there and had to close – make a decision. And I'm sitting there going – the Governor's about six years older than I am – wow, I'm glad I don't have to make that decision; but it was the right decision to make. We had a study out of MIT that showed business essentialness versus exposure risk, and the essentialness it gave me was at the bottom of the list. And the exposure risk that came in was at the top of the list. And the whole premise of the movie, *Contagion*, was it started in a casino in Macau.

Kelliann Beavers [11:50]

Oh, I didn't know that. I haven't ever seen that movie.

Michael Brown [11:53]

Yeah – no. It starts in Macau in a casino.

Kelliann Beavers [11:56]

Mm-hmm.

Michael Brown [11:58]

So it was a really, really, really hard decision, and then we had to go into the process of essential versus non-essential. Well, the American Emergency Response System was built for regional and local catastrophes. It was built for an earthquake in San Francisco.

Kelliann Beavers [12:25]

Right.

Michael Brown [12:27]

It was built for a terrorist incident in Philadelphia where you would be able to support the response by leveraging resources from elsewhere. So you send your firefighters up from San Francisco to help deal with the earthquake – or from Los Angeles to deal with the earthquake in San Francisco. You deal with the issue in Philadelphia with resources from – it wasn't built for 50 states all at once.

Kelliann Beavers [12:55]

Right.

Michael Brown [12:56]

It wasn't built at all for that. And the American Response System was built for a short duration. We literally had planning documents that said, "Well, after the tornado, go out and start to clean up the debris." (laughter)

Kelliann Beavers [13:14]

Yeah. We set that one aside for right now.

Michael Brown [13:20]

And what I raced to do initially was – there's a process to be eligible for federal resources. Well, the moment we closed the Strip, I knew that we would have no tax dollars coming in. And so my initial first project was to qualify out as a state for emergency relief, disaster relief. And the governor had that press conference, and within an hour, he signed the documents that I had ready declaring that emergency.

Kelliann Beavers [13:59]

Mm-hmm.

Michael Brown [14:00]

And we were the first state in the nation to qualify for emergency relief. And I guess everybody wants to talk about maybe the –? no, that was something I did. And a woman named Patty in our office really helped with that. We had to go out to all 17 counties and qualify our business in every county to become eligible for it, and we were the first in the nation. Because I just knew we were in for the long haul. I thought that the actual fatality rate was going to be higher, but it was a different style of virus. But we still lost 11,000 Nevadans – that's the City of Fernley, I think.

Kelliann Beavers [15:05]

Yeah, it's closer to twelve. It's a lot in Las Vegas.

Michael Brown [15:07]

Yeah. The 1918 pandemic hit young people. It hit people in their 20s. This hit seniors the hardest, so it was different. But then I also knew the Nevada economy was going to crater, and that we were going to have to get in some kind of relief mode. Governor Sisolak made a decision that we were not going to fight with the feds, and not going to fight with Trump, but he was going to have a list of stuff that he was going to try to get from Vice President Pence, who was leading the taskforce with the governors, and some Democratic governors started to play politics to fight with the feds. Governor of New York stuff. And Sisolak was much more practical. He was like "I need respirators. I need PPE."

We were aided immediately by Senator Reid, who got Jim Murren to put together a private sector taskforce, who could do things that we couldn't do quickly or efficiently, and that opened up the rolodex of all the people on that taskforce. And when we were making the nonessential and essential decisions, one of the critical points was, what do we do with – some of it was very direct. And there was federal guidance on all this, by the way, so these weren't arbitrary and capricious things. There's federal guidance on this from FEMA as to what was essential. And the essential businesses were designed under FEMA to keep the economy functioning like – frankly, it looked like it was for a small nuclear war, and it was for utilities, highways, and things like that.

Kelliann Beavers [16:56]

Oh.

Michael Brown [16:57]

And it looked like that's where – it looked like it came out of the old Civil Defense System. And so we had to kind of classify all the Nevada businesses according to that, and we had two bright women in the northern office that did all of that census stuff – determining which census code every business would be in against it all, and what was essential and non-essential. And they're terrible terms because nobody wants to be declared "nonessential." But it was in the context, I could say, of a civil defense system.

And then there were a couple of gray areas, like construction and mining, and they had access to their own personal protective equipment. And so what was done there was, we increased the OSHA enforcement. So we didn't have to go as far as construction and mining because they had their own PPE, and we substantially increased OSHA. (laughs) Oh, boy, did we do that?

Kelliann Beavers [17:58]

I bet everyone loved that.

Michael Brown [18:01]

Yeah. And it was like – one time I was on a phone call, and all it was like three months of

shifting general contractors. And it's like – because that would have flattened the Nevada economy even further.

Kelliann Beavers [18:14]

Mm-hmm.

Michael Brown [18:15]

It's always a bit of – I can be really hesitant – because I actually called the University of Miami, and they have a specialty in medical ethics and talked to somebody there about medical ethics in this circumstance – because I never wanted to prioritize economic development over public health.

Kelliann Beavers [18:35]

Right.

Michael Brown [18:36]

And I needed to know where the line was. So my counterparts in other states tried to do both things, public health first and foremost. And we had outside advisors who said, "If Nevada became a hotspot, people might never come back." And so it was tough medicine.

The frustrating thing was we were following the federal guidance, and yet the West Wing of the White House – you'd turn on the press conference, and they would be countermanding their own guidance.

Kelliann Beavers [19:14]

In terms of the ways they were relating to each other and distancing or not distancing. Is that correct?

Michael Brown [19:21]

Yeah. So you'd have guidance from FEMA saying, "Do this," and then Donald Trump would stand there and discount his own agency's guidance. That was frustrating.

Kelliann Beavers [19:35]

Yes, no doubt. One of the things you just spoke about was the COVID taskforce. And in one of the initial briefs that we are putting together, we are focusing a lot on these – a few groups that came together and worked across sectors in this way to create a different kind of government structure.

Michael Brown [19:59]

Yeah. [overtalking 20:01] Communication. One of the other things is that I communicate unbiased truth directly. So Betsy Fretwell, and I, and Chris Sanchez created a communications network of the business community that had all the affinity chambers, all the principal trade associations. And then every Friday at three o'clock, or as needed, we would have a call of all these folks and cascade official information down that network, and then they would cascade it down to their members. That's what we did inside.

And then we also did a – now, mind me, there's also an official process that's going on through FEMA, or a formal process that's going through the State Emergency Management System, but that's first responders talking to first responders. Does that make sense?

Kelliann Beavers [21:01]

Yes, it does. And that's the FEMA-mandated coordination?

Michael Brown [21:06]

Yeah. And that was the Emergency Response Center – and my view was to never get in their way. I'd go over there with the daily briefing. I'm going to tell you a funny story later, but I was never going to get in their way. But all the people who would otherwise be calling the governor's office saying, "What do we do? My members asked this. The chamber needs to know this. The Chamber needs to know that. The truckers want to know this." And so we did that every Friday at three or three-thirty. Then Jim Murren led this taskforce – private sector folks – and they, at one point, dispatched a 747 – one of Sheldon Adelson's 747s over to China, to pick up masks and all that kind of stuff, and all that PPE stuff, and I think we got somebody to buy in some other places. That was an advantage that Nevada had, that other states wouldn't have had – because Sanchez didn't challenge it in getting it through customs. We managed to get it through that with help from – you end up with these little things that are suddenly like "Oh, how do we get it through customs? Let's call Stephen Horsford."

So that was an essential. The Business Information Network and Jim Murren's network were the two that I was principally affiliated with. And then you had the National Guard, with what they were doing. And when we put the Guard in charge, that helped organize the entire first responder side of it. Because in emergency management, you had response, recovery, relief, and resilience. You kind of go through these four phases. Well, the response lasted for months.

Kelliann Beavers [23:00]

Yeah, and arguably, is still, in different ways, I guess you could say, relief or resilience, but there's still certain kinds of response going on, yeah.

Michael Brown [23:09]

Yeah, yeah, yeah. So do you want a funny aside?

Kelliann Beavers [23:15]

Of course.

Michael Brown [23:17]

So I realize now that I have to go to a meeting with the National Guard and with the medical community. And I'm supposed to be the "economic guy," and the Governor's, you know – and I'm supposed to go to this, and it's like "Well, all these guys, they all are going to be sitting there in their uniforms and their brass," and I thought, "Well, what do you wear to something like that?" And I thought "I need to look like the Secretary of Defense." I found my most serious suit and my most serious fedora, and I went to those meetings. (laughs)

Kelliann Beavers [24:00]

Yeah, I didn't even think about the logistics of presentation and interaction and ensuring that you're heard and sort of respected during some of those communications.

Michael Brown [24:15]

And yet, not interfere with the command structure because they have their job to do.

Kelliann Beavers [24:18]

Right.

Michael Brown [24:21]

And the medical advisors had their job to do. And I never wanted to get in a situation where we were putting economic advice ahead of the medical advice. Never wanted to be in that situation.

Kelliann Beavers [24:36]

Yeah. Do you want to talk a bit about, as the severity of the crisis subsided, and you were able to shift your mind back to concentrating on the economic recovery? Anything that you'd like to share about that?

Michael Brown [24:53]

Yeah. We realized that there was an attempt to do a coordinated interstate effort, and unfortunately, it just didn't happen.

Kelliann Beavers [24:59]

Oh, interesting. With other states?

Michael Brown [25:02]

Yeah, with other states.

Kelliann Beavers [25:04]

Oh.

Michael Brown [25:05]

Yeah, I think because every state was just so – people get tired of this stuff, you know? But every – Utah had done a lot of work on how to bring the economy back. They'd hired McKenzie, and they freely shared that with us, which was very nice of them. California, oh, my gosh – we couldn't have gotten through it without California. They provided us so much help on the medical side of things, and we repaid the favor by helping them with firefighting in '21, I think, yeah, the summer of '21.

Kelliann Beavers [25:46]

Oh, wow.

Michael Brown [25:48]

Yeah. So all this bit about us working with California, I mean where do you think we got the respirators?

Kelliann Beavers [25:53]

Uh-huh.

Michael Brown [25:56]

And so there's been a healthy relationship there with California. They were really helpful with very practical things. The two governors just seemed to like each other, and just seemed to work really well, and then I got a lot of that.

So Bob Hobbs and I, as we came out of the end of May of '21, we'd hit rock-bottom, and unemployment was way up. And we told SRI – they were working on a new state economic development plan – we told them to scrap that, and we want a resiliency plan. What do we have to fix, and how do we fix it? How do we make this state more resilient? And that's on the website. You can pull up the Resilience Plan. And we took – a couple of those issues made it through the legislative session in '21. And then so it helped us guide internally – the real shame was the collapse of the unemployment system, and that was just an underinvestment in IT resources. It dated back decades, and there was simply no way to fix that.

And so we had all that planning underway. And frankly, we were deluged with people sending us ideas on how to plan in a post-pandemic economy. But the principle one was that we had to strengthen our public health sector because we had to provide reputational assurance – so you can come to Nevada, have a good time, and not be sick. Because if we become a hotspot, that will impair our reputation, and people may never come back. And so standing up public health was first and foremost.

The CARES Act had come into play, and we were watching a small business die off. I mean it was just dying off. And there was a quote by a British official – Bank of England – and he says, "We've become very good at stabilizing the financial sector, but we've never learned how to bale out the coffee shop." And towards December of '21, one of the fed officials said in his speech "The best thing you can do right now is get into small businesses." And we were using the CARES Act in the public health system, and I went over, and I made the case that "Could we get five or ten million dollars to help at the universities?" because I thought the universities could play a better role in public health. They could improve the labs at the university.

Kelliann Beavers [28:50]

Uh-huh.

Michael Brown [28:52]

So they agreed to do that, and then Michelle White came to me, and she said, "Why don't you work with Zach Conine, we want an economic relief program, and you bring it to us." And so Zach and I worked on it, and we created a plan to 1) was to help landlords because of people who couldn't pay their rent, and then the other was to provide direct business relief. And some

states just mailed \$1,000 to all their businesses, and Zach Conine said, "No, it has to be more impactful," and he said, "We need to make this \$10,000."

So we put two programs together, Treasurer's Office, GOED, being the backroom, and Zach C. being the face. The Pence program and – I can't think what team it was called, and we took it up with small business. And the real estate program was based on the Utah program. They shared all the details with us. We budgeted 20 million, and the program was so complicated that we were struggling to get 8 million out the door. And so when we turned to the Pence program, we had to make that more direct. We budgeted, I think, 25 million – or 50 million – 25 million? And this was going to be \$10,000 of direct relief, and that program went like gangbusters.

So between all of it, I think we put out – and I don't have my government records anymore, as when I left office, I left everything.

Kelliann Beavers [30:35]

Right.

Michael Brown [30:38]

But I think we put close to 100 million dollars out into the universities, into small business, and into a variety of things through the CARES Act. And I wanted, because of what had happened with unemployment, I wanted just one extra check in the clearance process. We had a system in place to verify that they were eligible, and they had to certify it, and they had to do all these things.

So we came up with a system of Zach and I trying to find the business. And so if I don't know, Karma Coffee made an application, we knew Karma Coffee existed. If we knew restaurants – we knew that sector. Or we'd try to find them online, on the web.

Kelliann Beavers [31:31]

Uh-huh.

Michael Brown [31:32]

And if you couldn't find them on the web, we phoned them. (laughs) We phoned thousands of businesses, the treasurer and I, directly. And it was like "Hello, your application is pending. It's passed all the initial reviews. We just want to make sure that you're not sitting in Moscow somewhere filing this. Can you tell us about your business, and why you think you're eligible for this?"

Kelliann Beavers [32:00]

Is it crazy, to me, not to think that you should have had somebody that you could say, "Do this?"

Michael Brown [32:07]

You know- [overtalking 32:09]

Kelliann Beavers [32:10]

I mean I guess what you were saying about the size of the staff is part of it.

Michael Brown [32:14]

Yeah. But for the treasurer and I, we got a really good read on what was going on in the business world.

Kelliann Beavers [32:22]

I get it. So part of it was also gaining immediate and direct access to these conversations.

Michael Brown [32:27]

Oh, my gosh, was it ever? And we had staff – they did all the work, and then they would give us a list, and they'd say, "This is the phone list," and we'd go "Okay," and we'd just sit there and make the calls.

Kelliann Beavers [32:41]

Right.

Michael Brown [32:43]

And if something didn't feel right, we'd pass it back to the staff.

Kelliann Beavers [32:47]

Yeah.

Michael Brown [32:48]

And so we were not making a decision. We were doing a verification. And if it didn't feel right, then mark it "yellow" and pass it back to the staff. They did other things – I don't know what they did, actually.

Kelliann Beavers [33:03]

Yeah, but it served a purpose beyond verification, for you to kind of gain an understanding of what was going on, and talking-

Michael Brown [33:09]

What was going on? And I tend to better understand that Nevada small business is also a series of gigs.

Kelliann Beavers [33:19]

A series of "gigs," is that what you said?

Michael Brown [33:22]

A series of gigs – that they've got this little gig here, and this little gig there, and they're trying to make a go of it by – I came to understand the full extent of how many businesses are out there providing mental health services. This told me how much need there is for mental health services in Nevada by the sheer number of businesses out there trying to serve that market. I came to

understand how cosmetologists, barbers, and all of these folks interact with different ethnic groups that are out there. It was an incredible education for me as to how small business works. And what we discovered was that if you own a restaurant – you're a good cook – your business stuff is usually, just delegated out to somebody. We learned many, many things about small business that I would have never learned without making those calls.

The other thing is that it was kind of a friendly voice trying to help people in a time of crisis.

Kelliann Beavers [34:45]

Yeah, it seemed to have meant a lot to people. I get it.

Michael Brown [34:49]

Literally had people crying on the phone. Had one couple; they had a woodshop business, a woodworking business, that made all the props for the *Cirque* shows. And they had just made an investment in a van to deliver the props when the pandemic hit.

Kelliann Beavers [35:14]

Oh, that makes me want to cry.

Michael Brown [35:16]

And the van was going to get repossessed, and it was like wow, this was the difference between winning and losing for them.

Kelliann Beavers [35:27]

Yeah.

Michael Brown [35:28]

So-

Kelliann Beavers [35:30]

Well, that's pretty exceptional, and I'm so grateful for the opportunity to learn from you about this. Because so much of what I feel like we've been able to learn so far has been more at the regional or local level.

Michael Brown [35:42]

Yeah.

Kelliann Beavers [35:43]

And of course, that contains some information about the state, but the interstate concept in the things you're describing is very different.

Michael Brown [35:52]

We worked well with the county. I didn't have a lot to do with that because there were formal systems for that. When the LEAP committee was created, Marilyn Kirkpatrick was leaving. The Ohio Department of Public Health was putting out excellent guidance on reopening. And I

actually had a staff person assigned to track everything that was going on in Ohio during the pandemic. And we ended up relying on a lot of the reopening guidance, which was the federal guidance modified for application at the state level and then issued out.

Kelliann Beavers [36:31]

Uh-huh.

Michael Brown [36:35]

And so we worked really closely with Ohio.

Kelliann Beavers [36:39]

Did you just have connections there, or finding and feeling like it was a model that made sense for you? Or how did that happen?

Michael Brown [36:45]

It was a model that made sense. You've got Battelle there. You had Ohio State University in Columbus.

Kelliann Beavers [36:50]

Yeah.

Michael Brown [36:53]

You had a good public health. You had a governor who – Governor DeWine, governor for 12 years, or 8 years. He's been Attorney General; he's been Senator. And so it was just a lot of resilience in this state for whatever reason. I got to – I actually went to Ohio and I saw DeWine at a mutual friend's funeral. And I went up to find him, and he had no idea that we used so much of their material.

Kelliann Beavers [37:23]

Oh, I'm sure that meant a lot to him. That's awesome.

Michael Brown [37:25]

Yeah. Governors staff – I've got to tell you – I'm a Baby Boomer, and governor's staff were Millennials. And governor's staff, this Baby Boomer learned so much from the governor's staff. They were so good at the communication side and this, and they worked so hard. And I don't know that Michelle White, Scott, and that entire team will ever get the recognition that they deserve for just the incredible hours that they worked on all of these issues.

Kelliann Beavers [38:07]

Thanks for sharing that, and just the specificity of the intergenerational learning is really interesting. When you say, "The Lead Committee," are you saying like L-E-A-D?

Michael Brown [38:19]

It's L-E-A-P, and it was Commissioner Kirkpatrick, the commissioner from Reno – Ducey or something like that.

Kelliann Beavers [38:30]

Sure.

Michael Brown [38:33]

Yon Goicoechea out in Elko; Dr. Goicoechea. Terry Reynolds from BNI, and myself, and were charged with making sure everybody was ready to reopen. I was assigned Boards and Commissions, and so, as we were approaching – this is over Memorial Day Weekend – I had to reach out to all the Nevada Commission and Occupational Boards and say, "Hey if we reopen, are your members ready? Do you have your industry-specific guidance? Do you have this? Do you have that? Because all of this has to be in place before you get the signal to reopen." And then Reynolds worked with business, and I don't remember, really, what the others did.

Kelliann Beavers [39:23]

Wow, that's very interesting, and definitely not something that we've learned about. So thank you for sharing that.

Michael Brown [39:30]

I also, in the process, discovered that our Boards and Commissions had become so independent of the rest of the state government that no one had a phone list.

Kelliann Beavers [39:48]

Yeah, wow! These are exactly the kinds of things I just find so important for us to document. Not to be hypercritical, but to think about where that should have been, and how these kinds of things make coordination easier, how that infrastructure can be built – not just for emergencies, but how it should exist for everyday interaction on some level.

Michael Brown [40:14]

Yeah. It's always a dynamic of how many people you have in the room. Because the more people you have in the room, the less that will get done and the more that will leak. But if you don't have enough people in the room, then does the information cascade out?

So you had a really core governor's staff. I had taken a third of my staff and had just reassigned it to the governor's staff. Jimmy Humm went over to work in media relations. Greg Bortolin went over, the superintendent, you know. Chris Sanchez became part of logistics operations. And then I had a third of my staff trying to look forward, and then a third of my staff trying to do the mission of GOED, the ministerial stuff of GOED, recognizing the economy was all frozen up.

So you need flexibility in a moment like this, and you need situational awareness. And you need that situational awareness to cascade as far down as possible so that everybody who's in the command structure kind of understands what the mission and challenge is. And I think we were actually able to do that, both in the formal process run by the state FEMA – I can't remember what it was called.

Kelliann Beavers [41:33]

The MAC.

Michael Brown [41:36]

Yeah, the National Guard. And then the side dealing with the public, the trade association for labor guys, the constituencies out of the governor's office. Where we were lacking was media resources. There was no press conference room in the state government. No one's ever built a media facility. The legislature didn't have one; we didn't have one. So a lot of our early events were pretty rickety because we had no studio. No investment had been made in anything like that in Nevada. And the first couple of press conferences were Zoom calls using one of the staffer's cell phones.

Kelliann Beavers [42:29]

That's so intense. It makes me feel like a certain kind of grief. I mean I get it, but I don't understand how that happens.

Michael Brown [42:39]

Nevada just did not invest in – some of our counterparts, they had formal media facilities and press conference facilities. There's the old Glynn Room up in the Octagon, behind the Capitol, that you know, its technology was 20 years out of date. And it was an echo chamber, and it was not designed for a press conference either.

Kelliann Beavers [42:59]

Uh-huh.

Michael Brown [43:00]

And so we literally lacked some of the core things like that.

Kelliann Beavers [43:10]

Yeah, and do you think that evolved in a way that is paving the way for people who don't have those challenges?

Michael Brown [43:19]

If you go back to 9/11, when President George W. Bush was in the airplane, he was having all sorts of trouble communicating with the situation room, which is why they ended up diverting to one of the military bases. And the President went into the military base somewhere, like Missouri or someplace like that. Because the situation room wasn't working with their Force One. And so, after that, my gosh, they must have spent billions rebuilding all of that infrastructure so that never happened again in American history. And the White House lawn was torn up, for two years, as they expanded all that underground. So I'm hoping there have been investments in that, you know. We didn't get a fifth year, so I don't know the answer to that.

Kelliann Beavers [44:10]

Yeah.

Michael Brown [44:13]

But it gets back to the Great Pandemic of 1918 in that advice – unvarnished truth; full facts.

Kelliann Beavers [44:27]

Yeah, that's one you can just always have in your pocket. You don't have to be – you don't need to do anything to be prepared to tell the truth, other than commit to that, yeah.

Michael Brown [44:37]

That's right. And if you don't know it, you say you don't know it.

Kelliann Beavers [44:40]

Mm-hmm.

Michael Brown [44:42]

When we rolled out the vaccine, I thought that – this did catch me by complete surprise. The vaccine's coming out, and the federal guidance is asking us to prioritize it because first, you need to take care of your first responders and you need to take care of your medical personnel, or you won't have first responders and medical personnel, you know.

And so the hierarchy was developed – I wasn't involved in any of that. But I was shocked at the hesitancy, and I thought that people – I thought we would have the opposite problem. I thought the vaccine centers should be overwhelmed.

Kelliann Beavers [45:26]

Uh-huh.

Michael Brown [45:31]

And it was the opposite; having to run a contest, to give money away, to encourage people to get a vaccine? I don't know that I'll ever understand that, particularly since I knew the inventor of the vaccine and knew things about it. And I thought, you know, this is going to be incredible. And the hesitancy really shocked me. So you know, initially, there was that rush, and then it was like begging people to get vaccinated.

Kelliann Beavers [46:05]

Yeah. It definitely was something it took me a long time to get my head around. And I think the more we've talked with people, and I've internalized how much fear there was, at so many different levels, and how much distrust. It's sad, but at least I can understand it in a way that I didn't at the time, I think.

Michael Brown [46:27]

Yeah. The other factor that fits there is that people want certainty. And one minute, you think it's a surface transmission, and then you discover all – it's really not surface, it's in the air.

Kelliann Beavers [46:40]

Yeah.

Michael Brown [46:45]

a) The science was changing with us, and the vaccine was changing also. I mean, not the vaccine, the virus was changing also.

Kelliann Beavers [46:54]

Mm-hmm.

Michael Brown [46:56]

And without a White House that was explaining that we, as the subnational government, that's very hard for us to do.

Kelliann Beavers [47:05]

Right.

Michael Brown [47:06]

That's very hard for us to do.

Kelliann Beavers [47:13]

Okay. I'm coming toward the end of our time. One of our more open-ended questions is, are you hopeful, and if yes, what are you hopeful for?

Michael Brown [47:23]

Well, it has resorted to the Nevada economy. I knew we were never going back to 2019. And I gave a speech, and I said to the LVGA that we were going to enjoy a period like the "Great Gatsby," where Las Vegas was going to boom when the pandemic was over, but it would boom on the tourism side, and it would not boom on the convention side because technologies like Zoom, and just general corporate economics would hold the convention side back. But I said, "We're going to have this boom, but there's also going to be a reinvestment."

Now, we thought the CARES money was going to expire at the end of the Trump Administration. There's no guarantee that there ever would have been an ARPA Inflation Reduction Act, or any of that if the presidential election had turned a different way. And I'm not trying to be partisan – but let's put ourselves back in time here, to before the November 2022 election, we were racing to spend the CARES money because we didn't know that there would never be any more money after that. And so we were planning, frankly, for a period of prolonged fiscal austerity in the state. And the election produced ARPA and produced some other things, which changed the dynamic of the state's economy. But I think Bob Hobbs's 26th day in, or, you know, even higher – *billions* of dollars pumped into Nevada at all different levels. We're still riding that money. It's still working its way through the system.

So we were trying to position Nevada to adapt to the post-pandemic economy, which was going to be the reshoring of American manufacturing because the pandemic proved that just-in-time inventory didn't work. The change in distribution networks, and our position as a Pacific time zone state, but not being California made us really attractive. And there was a surge of new investment in Nevada in '22. It set record numbers of companies coming to the state, largely in

distribution and logistics, and some manufacturing. The potential is really there to benefit from all of this.

Northern Nevada has run out of workforce to service the growth of industries up there. Southern Nevada has the workforce, but it lacks the industrial parts with the infrastructure that it needs. My plan had been, if we had gotten a fifth year, was to focus on the dull and boring issues of industrial infrastructure, so that we would have a home for those places when they came here.

Kelliann Beavers [50:20]

Yeah.

Michael Brown [50:22]

Then came the pre-trade to industrial policy. This is a seminal shift in American Economics thinking. I think of it as big as deregulation in the late 1970s. I am not sure that Nevada has awoken to the fact there's been this big shift yet, and that there is this moment. And as I join Brookings, something I'm going to try to talk about – because China's now our economic rival, more than a rival. The world's changed, and it's going to create new opportunities that Nevada should be because of its geography on the receiving end. But we have to make the internal investments to be attractive.

I worry that the midwestern states – there was an article in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* over the weekend – they figured out they've got water – Lake Erie. And they figured out we don't necessarily have a lot of water. And so Ohio is beginning to realize that "Oh, we've got resources and lakefront," and so I think there's going to be a lot of competition coming from the Old Midwest now in this area. Where we have strategic advantages in the EV space, and I hope to see a lot more happening in that area. Does that answer that question? I don't want Nevada comfortable in this Great Gatsby moment. That was my fear; that we'd have this big surge in "revenge tourism," and people would think that was the "new normal." And American savings rates are already falling, credit card debt's rising. This Great Gatsby moment will end, and we need to be ready when it does come to an end.

Kelliann Beavers [52:16]

Thank you. That's really meaningful, and a great way to round out our conversation. I look forward to continuing to get to know you, Michael, and learning from you. This has been really, really meaningful. Thank you so much for your time.

Michael Brown [52:25]

Oh, certainly. And if there's an area, when you're going back through it and saying, "Oh, we didn't ask him about this, or that, or the other thing," just call me.

Kelliann Beavers [52:33]

I sure will. I hope you enjoy the rest of your time off, although it sounds like you're not totally taking time off. But I hope you-

Michael Brown [52:40]

Yeah – no. I wouldn't check an email. I looked at my email at 10:00, and Trevor said, "Hey, yeah. Why don't you pop up today?" And he was like "Oh, my gosh." (laughter) Well, all right, great. Nice to talk to you, and I look forward to seeing you next week.

Kelliann Beavers [53:00]

You, too. Thank you.

Michael Brown [53:02]

Take care. Bye now.

Kelliann Beavers [53:04]

Bye.

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