

Interview of: Stephen DeVries
Interviewer: Michelle Little
Interview Date: May 5, 2021



Stephen DeVries
Food Photographer
Birmingham, AL

Date: May 5, 2021
Location: Remote Interview (Birmingham, AL)
Interviewer: Michelle Little
Length: 35 minutes
Project: COVID-19 Oral History Project

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Michelle Little: Okay. So this is Michelle Little, and I'm here with Stephen DeVries, and today is May 5th of 2021, and this is for the Southern Foodways Alliance project on COVID-19. And, Stephen, the last time I interviewed you was June 18th of 2020, believe it or not. [laughs]

[00:00:23]

Stephen DeVries: Almost a year now.

[00:00:24]

Michelle Little: Yeah, almost a year ago. So what is memorable to you about the rest of that summer as you moved into fall? Like, what are some of the things that stood out to you? You had just—I think y'all were just moving back into shooting here. You'd been shooting at home. What are some things you remember about that summer?

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Stephen DeVries: We had a very, very busy summer. A lot of the clients I work with are in the food world, and a lot of them are very busy trying to promote that they're still making food, serving food. I was working with some grocery store chains that were, like, slammed and couldn't keep things on the shelves, and so the advertisements for a lot of those people picked up. So we actually, started in May, leading into June and then beyond, just had a very, very, very busy year, which is probably not exactly the same experience for a lot of other people, but we felt very lucky to have that much work coming in.

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Then it was just a lot of—we spent a lot of the year, like, adapting to what COVID shooting looked like, because we couldn't have clients on set anymore, so now we had to figure out how to work with clients who were thousands of miles away, but also wanting to act as if they're right here with us and making decisions, creative decisions on set, so we had to work on ways to screenshare and to get footage and video and photos across the Internet to people offsite in a clean and clear way that they could actually, like, participate creatively. We had to do lots of COVID testing for crew and tracking who was with who, and taking temperatures, so it was sort of adding a lot of layers to the work we did that were, you know, adapting to the COVID world. So that's kind of what our entire fall was like.

We got busy enough that actually in the fall we added several employees. We actually grew the company and made several hires, which is exciting that despite all of the things going on, that we were able to—we brought in a postproduction team, we brought in an AD, we brought a former intern back in as studio assistant to kind of help manage things. So we were actually able to grow the team a little bit to help keep up with the workload, which was really exciting as well. So those are sort of the memorable parts, sort of adapting to COVID world, and then seeing the team grow and expand in the midst of all that.

[00:02:36]

Michelle Little: And what were some of the—I remember in our first interview, you mentioned the OSHA training. So, I mean, how helpful—was their messaging very clear

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and was their training clear in how to figure out how to adapt to new rules and regulations? I mean, what was that process like?

[00:02:57]

Stephen DeVries: So we also, in the midst of expanding, our staff had a change in personnel. Our producer of several years moved back in the editorial world, and we brought in a new producer who started this January, so we hired her in December and she started in January. As a full-time freelance producer and, prior to that, an agency producer coming to those jobs, she had done quite a bit of COVID training, so she brought a lot of experience to the team once she came on.

I think through the fall, with our previous producer and with us kind of working through that stuff, there were some very, very clear and concise, like, industry norms, like you needed to be taking temperatures, everyone obviously had to wear masks, we needed to maintain social distancing during lunch when you had to remove masks, taking COVID testing prior to shoots. Like, some of that stuff was pretty, like, clear and outlined, and then some of it was, like, figure it out. Different people in different productions and different crews had different ways of handling things, so we each had to figure out the ways that made us and our clients and our crew all feel as safe as possible, also, like, allowing us to continue to work.

So I think, like, the training gave a good basis and, like, some of the good, like, sort of specific things you had to do, and beyond that, you kind of had to, like, fill in the blanks, like, “Okay, I’m going to be doing all of those things. We’re also going to do this, because this is, like, what makes us feel safe.” Or, “We’re going to allow this.” You kind

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of had to figure out what was right for your crew. And the types of production you do, we're largely tabletop and foods, so we didn't have tons of stuff with talent. We had a little bit. But, like, crews that had talent had to figure out how do you—we did one shoot with talent last year when we were working with SAG, and the talent that was interacting had to be from the same household. We couldn't bring—normally you might cast a mom and then you go somewhere else and cast a daughter, go somewhere else and cast a dad, and they are three independent random people that you make into this fake family for your production. Ours actually had to be a mom and a dad or a mom and a grandma from the same household. So we had to adapt to that, so that changed the nature of casting. Suddenly our net for finding a family was, like, much smaller because you had to find an actual family who all were actors.

So there's just things like that, that some rules were dictated to us by—like I mentioned, we had to work with SAG on some productions, and SAG had their rules. You had to do specific things for SAG. We had our production rules, and then beyond that, we just had to figure out for us at Eleven Productions, like, what were the things that we were going to do to make our crew, our staff, and our clients all feel safe.

[00:05:13]

Michelle Little: So you were actually able to find an entire family of actors? [laughs]

[00:05:18]

Stephen DeVries: Yeah, and what was even harder, because it was a Hispanic market production, so they needed to be a Hispanic family that also were fluent in English and

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Spanish, and a family, a multigenerational family, so we needed a daughter, a mother, and a grandmother for this production. We ended up finding a mother and daughter who lived in the same house, and then the grandmother from the house wasn't available, so we ended up bringing in a second grandmother, her other grandmother from her other side of the family, who they didn't live together, but they had been COVID, like, sheltering together. So it was tricky. Normally, we would be able to go through casting agencies and come back with "Here's a list of seventy-five daughter options, and here's a list of eighty-five mothers." And this time it was like "Here's four families we can work with. Which of these families do you want to do?"

It definitely limited things a lot more, but, at the same time, it made everyone feel—because those talent often had to be really close contact with each other, working together, acting together, because you need to still look like a family, and you don't want them separate. They often, if their faces were on things, had to have masks off, and so by doing that, it made everyone feel a lot safer.

[00:06:21]

Michelle Little: That makes sense. Yeah, and so how often did you have kind of a last-minute glitch? Like, I remember I actually filled in for someone in a commercial you were shooting in December, like, it was very last-minute because I think the person had woken up with a fever. I mean, did that happen a lot, that you were scrambling?

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Stephen DeVries: We had very few scares, luckily. We had maybe two times through all—we were shooting weekly, multiple times a week often, through all of the summer, fall, winter, into the winter of this year. I think maybe two times we had an onset scare, none of which actually manifested in anything actually happening. And then we've had just a handful of people that called in sick or called in, like, with worries before they came to set. But not much.

I think most of the crew that we work with that are in this freelance world understand that, like, their work comes from a freelance world and they need to be extra, extra cautious or else they lose work, and I think everyone was anxious to make sure they were keeping work flows going, so I think people acted out of abundance of caution in that world maybe more so than people that work at a corporate job that know they can just take sick leave if they get sick. Freelancers don't necessarily get sick leave. You just don't work and you're not getting paid. So because of that, I think people tended to be a bit more cautious.

But, yeah, just a handful of times, and often what would happen is, you know, if we had a specific crew member that said, "Hey, I woke up and I'm not feeling good," they would say, "I've got another guy I'm going to send in my place, another guy I work with." So we didn't really run into very many situations.

We had one situation where a stylist on set got a call that her husband had a fever, and turned out he had COVID. We'd been on set, but we had been following all set protocol. Everyone had been wearing masks, and so no one on set ended up catching anything. She left set and went and got tested. She was negative, then a week or two later after caring for her family, got COVID. But because we all had masks, we were social

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distancing, we were doing all the protocol, not a single person on—it was a large crew.

Not a single person on crew. So we've had that happen once or twice, and much less now that more and more people are getting vaccinated.

[00:08:30]

Michelle Little: Okay. Well, that's awesome! Now, in December, you had a scare. I mean, do you think you definitely had it? I mean, can you just discuss how that process went for you? [laughs]

[00:08:42]

Stephen DeVries: I'm pretty sure it was a false positive. We went to a photo shoot in Nashville, again following all of the protocol for the production. Before we went to set, we had to disclose if we had anything at all, and I happened to have a sore throat, which I assumed was—I have terrible allergies. I assumed it was allergies, but you still have to disclose it. So I disclosed it and they asked me to go get a rapid test. We'd already done our tests leading into the shoot, but I had to go get a rapid test the night before.

And so me and one of my colleagues who had carpooled to Nashville together went and got our—since we were both in the car, we both had to get tests. We got tested and mine came back negative and his came back positive. So before we ever stepped foot on set, we caught that. They ended up having to postpone the shoot, and we left. Again, because of that, we didn't expose the twenty-five people on crew. Like, no one was exposed. But all of the safety protocols worked.

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But, obviously, I was in a car for three hours to Nashville and three hours from Nashville with him, so I went back the next day, when I got home, and got another rapid test, and it came back positive. I quarantined for ten days, never had any symptoms, and on day eleven, I went and got another test and it was negative. Then two weeks later, went and got an antibody test and it was negative. So I'm pretty sure mine was a false positive, having no antibodies and negative test immediately after, and no symptoms. But my colleague didn't. He, like, lost his taste, very mild symptoms, he lost his taste and smell, and then bounced back and was fine after that.

[00:09:56]

Michelle Little: Oh, my gosh.

[00:09:55]

Stephen DeVries: That was the closest we had. But, again, like, the checking of temperatures, the disclosing of any, like, symptoms, the testing beforehand kept us from going on the set with twenty-five people, where we would have had talent who had no masks. By kind of following all the steps, it sort of worked. It did what it was supposed to do.

[00:10:12]

Michelle Little: Good grief. So what was the—by then you were traveling again, and I think the last time we talked, we did our interview, you had not started to travel again. So how did you navigate easing back into that?

[00:10:28]

Stephen DeVries: Travel picked up for us pretty fast. Sometime in the tail end of last summer, specifically a couple of our clients in Florida that wanted to be back in person and asked if we were comfortable traveling, we did some research, and obviously been following the news and all of the CDC guidelines, and it seemed as if air travel was pretty safe. It seemed like there had been almost no—as far as I could find from all my research and stuff, there were also no, like, super-spreader events tied to any airfare, and very few reports of airfare being, like, a place where spread was happening. So we just decided to give it a try and see, and we felt very safe.

We fly Delta because that's what our account is with, and they were doing a great job of cleaning planes, making sure everyone had masks on. If you took your mask off, they were, like, right there saying, "Sir, please put your mask back on." They were keeping middle seats open.

So we started flying pretty early last summer, felt very safe, and so we flew a tremendous amount for work last year and never had any—I think it was, like, I felt probably less safe at, like, the grocery store than I did on planes, because at the grocery store you have this random mix of people who just don't care and pull their masks off. On planes, everyone had their masks on. So it picked up pretty quick and it stayed steady since. We obviously haven't had any problems, had any issues with it.

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Michelle Little: And then what has flying been like? I mean, were the planes very full? Were they half-empty? And then how have they progressed up until—like, when was the last time you flew?

[00:11:53]

Stephen DeVries: I flew a couple weeks ago, probably been two or three weeks, and like I said, I only fly Delta because that's where our accounts are, so that's the only experience I have is Delta. I'm not sure how everyone else is handling it. But they have largely kept all middle seats empty, so you're never having to sit next to somebody, or if they're like twos, they often keep the aisle empty, so it's just the windows. And they clean the planes ahead of time and give you wipes to clean off your seats when you go in. Everyone has to wear masks. It's pretty much the same—I think they are probably about to open up seats again. I feel like I read that recently somewhere, that, like, sometime this summer, they're going to start opening up seats again to higher capacity. But it's felt very safe and very clean, and they've done a really good job of, like, maintaining sort of pretty strict, like, protocol for anyone that's traveling with them.

[00:12:39]

Michelle Little: Okay. Awesome. And have the types of projects that clients are requesting—I mean, has your type of work or the focus of your work, have you seen it shift any during the pandemic? Like, what clients are wanting or—

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Stephen DeVries: Not really. Honestly, I think a lot of it stayed pretty similar to what we were doing before. The biggest shift I've seen is just scaling back on stuff, you know. Projects that may have had ten talent and much, much larger crews, they're wanting to do them on smaller scales to keep a smaller footprint. That seems to be basically safer, smaller crews, and then obviously just the change in the way we do things, because, like, still a lot of our stuff is remote. Like, different clients have different protocol for their crew, that a lot of our stuff still happens remote where clients aren't traveling yet. We still have to do it that way. But in terms of, like, the content of the types of shoots, it's stayed pretty much the same.

We've had a few, like, kind of response-to-COVID-specific projects, like, you know, promoting things in a post-COVID world or in a COVID world, so, like, those projects were maybe, like, a little bit more catered to, like, the times, but outside of that, the general stuff seems to be the same, other than just being scaled down a little bit.

[00:13:52]

Michelle Little: And what are those, like, COVID-world-style—I mean, like, what are the—like, what would you say is a, like—what do you mean when you say that? Yeah.

[00:14:02]

Stephen DeVries: A good example is we got to participate in a really fun commercial for Publix Super Markets, and what they did is they wanted to show families still interacting and still living life and still having fun, and then, obviously, like, the time was with Publix being the place that can supply all the things that you need for your picnics or

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your family pizza nights or your movie nights, but in a COVID world. So it's, like, your family-only movie night in the backyard or your family-only picnic.

But what they did for that specific project was they hired—I can't remember the exact number—six, seven, eight different directors to shoot in their homes with their families. So I was one of them, so I got to shoot with my daughter and my wife and our dog at our house, and we shot her riding her bike, and we shot her playing in the library, and we shot her playing soccer out back. And they did the same thing with several other directors in different places with different people and different sort of environments, different homes, all different corners of the country, and then they put it together in this commercial that showed all these families sheltering in place or safe. This was done last summer, like, when everyone was still, like, very locked down but still living life, still enjoying life. So that was, again, an example of a project that was, like, both from, like, conceptual side and from the actual, like, logistical production side, were, like, very COVID oriented, Like, they had different directors only shooting in their homes with their families, where things are safe, but they also, like, made the whole thing thematically about, like, what it looks like to still live life and thrive and have fun with your family within that COVID world.

[00:14:07]

Michelle Little: That's really cool!

[00:15:28]

Stephen DeVries: That's kind of an example.

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[00:15:30]

Michelle Little: Yeah! That's a neat—well, did you notice a lot of things like that, that people were shooting in homes, you know, and then bringing things together from all different—I mean, that's just such a cool concept.

[00:15:45]

Stephen DeVries: That's the only one that I worked on. I mean, I did see—I mean, I saw more commercials, just, like, digital commercials, watching Netflix or Hulu or things like that, where they were obviously done on, like, a more, like, small footprint, like people in their home shooting in, like, more low-fi ways and cutting things together. You saw more commercials that are utilizing, like, iPhone footage in the commercials and things like that. Some of that may just be, you know, like, iPhones have cool cameras now and people are trying to, like, utilize the technology, but some of it might have been, like, a response to COVID and this is a way that we can create content. But, yeah, I mean, that's probably like the most clear-cut, like, example of, like, one that both, like I say, conceptually and production-wise, like, kind of fit into the COVID mold in a way that, like, we wouldn't have done pre-COVID, I don't think.

[00:16:32]

Michelle Little: Yeah. That's really cool. Okay. And then shifting a little bit to vaccinations, I mean, how did the categories and the patterns of vaccinations affect you guys? I mean, was it difficult to figure out what category you all fit into?

[00:16:54]

Stephen DeVries: Yeah, it wasn't necessarily difficult. We just sort of—it was easy to know what we didn't fit into. So when it was first launched, we knew we weren't part of that first wave. Then when it went to the second phase, we knew we weren't part of that. That's the one that educators, I think, where, like, my wife was able to get hers, but we still didn't fit into the mold. What was hard was—then when it went to the third phase, it had media as an option, so we just picked media and were able to go get it.

So that seemed like an easy—and then really, honestly, about the time that we got ours, I think here in Alabama it was approaching the—like, less and less people were actively seeking them out, so it was easier to get them at that point, I think. Like, within days of the beginning of my first one, which I had to go down to Auburn to get because I couldn't find an appointment here, within days of that, I got emails that it was open to anyone who wanted to come. So, like, it seemed we were kind of like right on the tail end of, like, keeping it more locked down to specific groups, then they just sort of opened up.

But, yeah, the hardest part was just finding appointments and just waiting, like knowing that, like, we were anxious to get them because we're having to interact with people on a regular basis, we're bringing talent and we're bringing crew and we're having to fly and travel, so we have a staff of six here. Our company, like, all of us wanting to get them and then all of us sitting, like, waiting, going, "When's it going to be time? When's it going to be time?"

And then it was really disorganized, I would say, or just maybe not disorganized, but, like, confusing to figure out to schedule them. Like, I got, like, sent a billion different

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things, register on this site, this site, or try here or try this and try that, and, like, it was sending me all different directions, and none of them were working. So, like, actually tracking down an appointment was the hard part, but once we knew—once, like, the media group came open, several of our staff were able to get them earlier, for various reasons, but the last of us that hadn't were all able to schedule them right away.

[00:18:41]

Michelle Little: That's awesome. Yeah, it was—I mean, I don't know about you, but I remember spending almost an hour a day for a while trying to figure out—

[00:18:41]

Stephen DeVries: Looking for—

[00:18:49]

Michelle Little: Yeah! [laughs]

[00:18:50]

Stephen DeVries: I kept getting—I was still like, “Try Sam's Club. No, try Walgreen's. No, try CVS. Try UAB.” And everywhere I kept trying just kept saying “Sure we'll put you on the list.” And I got a “Well, if you're not on the list, try this, like, hotline and it'll put you on the—.” I mean, I tried everything, and nothing happened. Then once the media one opened, we were still trying and striking out everywhere.

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My parents live in Auburn. They said, “Well, try EAMC Auburn. It seems like they always have appointments.” And we were able to log in and it basically gave us any day, any time, pick your time. So we picked, and we all drove down a couple of hours to Auburn, and by the time our second one came around, it was easy here. We just did a drive-up and got our second one here in town.

[00:19:25]

Michelle Little: Oh, okay.

[00:19:26]

Stephen DeVries: That saved us another trip. But, yeah, literally, like, days after we drove to Auburn, we got our first shot, then days later, suddenly I started getting emails back from UAB and CVS and all these places saying “All right, appointments are available now.” But, like I said, by the time I went and got my second one, we went to drive-through at Legion Field. We got there early, and we were sitting in line with probably 100 cars.

We were probably thirtieth in line, and a woman drove by and said, “Hey, if you drive down to Parker High School, it’s five blocks away, they’re wide open, the line, so go down there.” So one of my colleagues who was in my car got out and walked because I didn’t want to lose my spot in line. But he walked down and called, said, “Yeah, come down here. It’s wide open.”

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So I drove down, and literally just drove up, got my shot, sat fifteen minutes or whatever it was, and then drove away, like, didn't have to wait a minute. I mean, it was just clean, clear, straight through.

[00:20:08]

Michelle Little: That's amazing. [laughs]

[00:20:09]

Stephen DeVries: So, yeah, it's an ever-evolving thing, I think.

[00:20:14]

Michelle Little: Yeah, for real, yeah. Okay. And I know we discussed this right before, we were not recording, but you were talking about now that—so you said everyone on your staff is now vaccinated. So how has that changed, like, some of your day-to-day operations?

[00:20:31]

Stephen DeVries: As of this week, everyone is two weeks or more out from their second vaccine, so we, as a staff, are just adhering to the CDC guidelines, so because all of us are fully vaccinated and now two weeks out from the vaccine, when it's just us here in the office, we're able to go maskless and just sort of basically be back to normal. When we bring outside people in, we still wear masks and we're still sort of navigating what—we don't know what, like, the production protocols are yet, so at this point, we're still

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wearing masks for all productions, unless it's just my staff, but almost all our productions, we bring in freelancers of some sort. So we're still wearing masks for all those productions. Right now it's great. We're doing most of our meals outside. We have a patio outside, and the weather's been nice, so we've been able to eat outside, which is helpful for mealtime, rather than having spread everyone all across the studio.

But we're still, like, looking for, like, some of the bigger production companies that are releasing production guidelines to give us some guidance on what next steps. We're not sure if it means, like, once a crew comes in, if everyone can supply proof of vaccine and it's two weeks out, can we do shoots without masks or do we still need to maintain masks, since we're still trying to sort out what that looks like, since this is all so new and we're literally a few days out of being two weeks out here. But in terms of our internal staff, we're able to go back to our normal, like, day-to-day work here as a crew, without masks on, which is really nice. We had our first meeting yesterday as, like, a team at the conference room, like, without all being masked up for the first time in over a year, and we were able to just, like, talk through what our projects for the week were like, and so that's really nice, being able to feel safe as a crew again.

[00:22:07]

Michelle Little: Yeah, that's amazing. So when you bring other people in, I mean, do you actually ask people to show their cards, or how are you navigating—

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Stephen DeVries: We haven't had to—well, so far, most of our productions are still, like I said, requiring testing. We're actually doing a shoot—we're bidding on a shoot that would be next week, and they're requiring vaccine or not, so requiring everyone to get rapid tests within twenty-four hours of the shoot, regardless of that, so it doesn't even matter if people have been vaccinated. We don't even have to ask. We just have to still get everyone tested. And like I said, it's still new. We haven't done any shoots since we've all been fully vaccinated two weeks. We went on shoots last week, but we were still under that two-week—I think the CDC guidelines are saying that the full effective rate starts at about two weeks after vaccination.

So we haven't done any shoots yet where all of us have been two weeks out. Next week will be our first one. So, so far, we're kind of on a more personal level of asking people, "Hey, did you get vaccinated yet? Have you gotten your shots yet?" But in terms of, like, structure for production, like, that's not been a thing just yet. It's really still been doing the same questionnaires, asking the same symptom things, taking temperatures. That sort of stuff is still—wearing masks has still all been part of the way we're doing production, and I think we'll continue to operate out of a place of, like, over-caution until we feel very confident and we have clear guidelines either from the CDC or through some of these other production companies that are putting out sort of production standards that we can operate in a different way. We'll just probably continue to do what we've been doing.

[00:23:35]

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Michelle Little: So is it more looking to other production companies or does OSHA issue new guidelines?

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Stephen DeVries: I'm not 100 percent sure. I sort of rely on my producer to kind of be the point person for what's going on. I think it's a combo of—and I'm not even sure if it comes from OSHA. There's several, like, production—they're not production companies, but sort of production, like, groups of people that, like, they do these webinars and meetings and sort of discuss, "Okay, as a production world, all of us here across the country in production, like, these are some of the things that we want to see happening across the board." And they sort of set the standards, so that you know when you go to a shoot are they adhering to, like, safety protocol, are they not.

Then like I said before, a lot of the rules get handed down from different things. If you're working on a union job, the unions will send you specific rules. If you're working on a SAG job, working with SAG talent through a signatory agency, like, they'll say, "These are the SAG rules you have to follow." So some things will just sort of be handed down from other agencies, and we have to kind of adhere to the strictest ones that are given to you, but some of, like, our internal policies will be set by just kind of watching what the rest of the production world is doing as a response to sort of the changing state of things, and then just seeing what we feel like is safe. But, yeah, it's not, like, a very clear-cut, like, you just go to this website, it tells you here's how to do production. It's a little bit more ambiguous than that, so it's a lot of research, it's a lot of staying up to date with forums and other production agencies and following sort of trends and seeing what

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people are doing and just trying to do our best to make wise decisions for the staff and crew.

[00:25:11]

Michelle Little: Yeah. And so do you—are you still keeping—do you need to get that?

Like, I know you've got people. [laughs]

[00:25:15]

Stephen DeVries: No, nothing important yet.

[00:25:18]

Michelle Little: Are you still keeping your crews pretty small? Like, I know y'all had to scale back on how many people you had around.

[00:25:28]

Stephen DeVries: We don't have specific—some of our shoots for some of our clients, we were given, like, specific, like, no more than nine people on set or something. I don't remember the exact numbers. But I know a few of our clients, like, as part of their, like, liability policies, they were limiting the number of people allowed on set, and sometimes that even meant that even if they were a local client, they couldn't be on set because we really needed that number of crew, and they coming as a client would have pushed us over, so they had to stay remote just for the sake of that.

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So some of that, what was present before, it seems to be loosening up on. Crews generally are still a little bit smaller than they were before. I think it's, like, still this sort of limbo of people, like, adapting to, like, you know, where we had—I think that'll loosen up some, but I think there also is some level of, like, just trying to, you know, keep the less people you have, the less chance that you have of that one person who's sick. And I do think, though, the more people get vaccinated or fully vaccinated, the more it's going to start to slowly—it'll probably be a gradual thing, but more back into normal state of affairs, I hope. But, yeah, so it's been—I think our crews have sort of shrunk down last year and have sort of stayed consistent since then.

It also depends on the project. We did a project a few weeks ago that had a fairly large crew, and then, you know, we have a project next week that'll have a fairly large crew, and the week after that, we have a small crew. So sometimes it depends on what you're doing and what the project is and what it actually calls for, because there's, like, a minimal number that you have to have to get certain things done, so some projects, you just have to have that many people to do what you need to do.

[00:26:59]

Michelle Little: Yeah. And then what about networking and meeting with new clients? Are you doing that by telephone or how are you meeting with new clients?

[00:27:09]

Stephen DeVries: That's been a tough one. I actually—like, the last thing I did before lockdown was I was in New York for meetings. I was there for a full week, met with a

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bunch of people, and then went straight into a shoot, and the whole world locked down during my shoot. But that's been tough this year. I mean, luckily for us, we've stayed consistent and busy enough with the clients that we have, that we haven't had to, like—like, it's a weird catch-22, because if you're busy, you don't have time to go look for new clients because you're busy, but then suddenly when you're not busy, you haven't been looking for new clients because you've been busy. So it's like that weird catch-22, trying to figure out how to do both at the same time.

We've still kind of maintained some of our more passive marketing stuff. We do some source books where we put advertisements in, along with a bunch of other photographers, that gets sent out to clients. We're part of several of those groups. We do e-blasts, kind of promoting the work that we're doing here, the new researchers we have here, the growing team members. So we've done some of that. And then I've done a few virtual meetings with just different—actually did one last night with a potential client, just to sort of meet up on Zoom, share my work, share my portfolio. But it's definitely been much more scaled down than what I've done in the past, just because of the nature of where we're at. I think, like, in-person meetings are so hard because people aren't even back at their offices yet, let alone, like, going out and meeting with people, and most of the people I tend to meet with, just because we're here in Birmingham, most of my clients aren't. So, like, I have to go somewhere. I have to go to New York or to L.A. or to Tampa or Orlando or Atlanta. So, like, going somewhere where people aren't even in their offices, it's still not really a thing.

[00:28:35]

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Michelle Little: Right, right. And then do you think the pandemic has affected you creatively, like, just the way you think and see things and your visions for things?

[00:28:49]

Stephen DeVries: I don't know if, like, on a broader scale creatively, but it definitely has made us, as a team and, like, maybe me as the director here have to, like, get more creative with problem solving, because now we have—now, instead of just solving a creative problem, we have to also solve a logistical problem, so whereas before, you know, when you're doing a production, you really have, like, two main problems to solve, which is the creative, like how am I going to do this and what am I going to bring to the table that makes this thing awesome and creative. And then the, like, budget really is like, all right, now here's what I want to do and here's what I have to make it happen. How do I make it happen? And now we've got this third layer of, like, how do we also do that with less crew and safe and without clients onsite. So you have this COVID layer.

So it's made you have to sort of like add an extra layer of thought process into everything you do. You're still having to do those first two things on all your projects. You still have budgets and you have to make the creative fit that budget. You still have to figure out the creative side. But now you have to also logistically say how do we do this also with our client across the country and they can't see the camera clearly because I have to share through Zoom and it's compressing the image. And our talent is here, but they have to wear a mask, so we can't show their face. You know, like all those things, you've got this other layer. So I think that, maybe.

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In terms of it creatively, I think—I mean, we had, like I said, a great year with really fun projects and we were able to just continue to pour ourselves creatively into those projects in the same way that we always did in terms of our side of things, like creating the concepts and bringing, like, a client’s idea to life. Like, that staff was all pretty, I think, sort of in the same world. And we were able, like, with our growing the team and we added some equipment and things here that opened up some new creative possibilities for us, so we were able to continue to, like, diving creatively into our work throughout last year. I think it’s really that logistical side that’s changed, maybe, and I think, you know, in some ways it’s good to just—I mean, that’s what all of this production work is, is problem solving, so adding another level of problems to solve just kind of helps strengthen your problem-solving skills.

[00:30:38]

Michelle Little: That’s a good positive way to look at it. [laughs] Okay. And then last question, because I know you’ve got a lot to do, but is there anything that you changed during the pandemic because of the pandemic that you think will stay? Like, what do you think the lasting impacts of this last year are on you?

[00:30:57]

Stephen DeVries: That’s a—I don’t know. I mean, I think from production standpoint, I think seeing the success of production throughout the last year across the industry, with the remote, like, workflows and, like, the need for distancing will probably, at least in a limited way, will stick around in some places because people will say, “Well, hey, we did

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this all last year. It was fine. So instead of flying our whole crew across the country, we're just going to stay here and do remote work. It worked last year. Why not?" So I think some level of that will stay.

But I also think, at the same time, I think there's going to be, like, a flip of people that are just desperate to, like, be back hands-on creative, that don't want to be across the country on a Zoom call, that want to be there in person, that are going to say, "No, no, like, once things are safe, we need to get back out there to be able to, like, feel creative in a collaborative space again." So I'm not really sure.

This doesn't maybe, like, affect me as directly, but I do think, like—because I work with a lot of ad agencies. Like, a lot of my clients come through advertising agencies and marketing firms, and it sounds like, talking to all those people, a lot of them are considering what a permanent work from home or, like, permanent, like, split sort of semi-work from home, semi come into the office. Several of my clients are doing, like, two days in the office, three days out one week, then three days in, and two days out the next week, and that would have never even been talked about before. So I think that may change the nature of, like, how we collaborate, because we may not have that, like, ability to just all be in the same place at the same time on a regular basis again with certain clients. And I think a lot of them are seeing it as, like, a cost-cutting thing. Like, it worked successfully across this year, so why do we need to have this big, gigantic office space when we can sort of like—but I don't know.

But, like, for us, I can say for our specific—we're small. There's six of us here. But, like, all of us were desperate to, like, be back here together. Like, the type of work we do is so collaborative, across the board from my postproduction team, my pre-pro

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team, like, all of us have to work together in so many ways, that when we were having to be remote and having to be separate, we just all were desperate to not, to be back in a place where we can just pop into an office and sit down and look at a video and review it and give feedback, and pop into the producer's office and discuss the upcoming shoot and crew members, and things like that. I think we were desperate for that flip back to that normalcy, because it just really fuels the type of creative and collaboration that we do here, that we were losing.

But, yeah, I don't know. I think that remote shooting is probably the—like, from an industry standpoint, I think that that's going to stay around in some capacity, I hope. And I don't think it'll stay the norm. Like, right now it's still larger than norm. We're just slowly slipping back into in-person. But I bet it will stay around at least some ways. Just from a logistics and cost-savings perspective, I think that some people are going to see that as a viable option moving forward.

[00:33:38]

Michelle Little: All right. Well, was there anything else that I didn't ask that you think people should know about what you or what photographers went through this year?

[00:33:47]

Stephen DeVries: I think—I mean, I mentioned this earlier, but I think I know a lot of other photographers, especially ones that focused on people, that didn't have the kind of year we did, you know. Because our clients were food-based and were restaurants and grocery stores that were, like, pouring into advertising because they were making big

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moves and were really staying busy last year, we stayed busy, but I know, like, a lot of photographers that I had relationships with that focused on people weren't shooting people because he couldn't be around people. So I think a lot of people had a very, very different experience than we had here and had really tough years trying to, like, figure out what to do, and that kind of work slowed down.

I mean, I also know there were, like, a lot of creative casualties to COVID. Several magazines that I used to shoot for regularly closed and laid their entire staffs off and they're going and they're not coming back. And I know a lot of people that—that was a smaller portion of our work, because we do mostly commercial, but at one point years ago, like, all of my work was editorial, and I know a lot of people still focused on editorial, and a lot of those things started to dry up. I think that probably affected people and will have a longer-lasting effect too. So I think it's interesting, there's just different reactions and responses to what happened, based on what kind of work you did, what kind of industry you were in, what kind of relationship—there's so many different factors. So we, I think, especially the photo world, fared really well, which I'm very grateful for, especially because I have a whole staff and a whole team here, and everyone was able to stay stable through. But I know not everyone else in our industry had the same experience.

[00:35:17]

Michelle Little: Yeah, yeah. All right. Well, thank you.

[00:35:21]

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Stephen DeVries: Yeah.

[End of interview]