



“Recommitting to the Reason” – What’s changed in 2020, and how has it affected you professionally?

The last 12 months brought about lots of reflection and lots of change in everyone’s lives. What guides us through these challenging times, and what is the reason underlying finding the way?

This and more were the focus of the BELIEVES session titled “Recommitting to the Reason – What’s changed in 2020, and how has it affected you professionally?” featuring Gene Rice, owner of Vantage Realty Partners, and co-founder of Compassion Kitchen; and Kevin Burke, owner of Galla’s Pizza on Tuesday, February 9, 2021.

To kick things off, Gene spoke of his wife, Isabel, and their three kids, and Kevin, spoke of his wife, Dora, and their four kids. Then Kevin shared about what led him to be the owner of Galla’s Pizza.

“I made a career move about 2.5 years ago,” Burke shared. “My kids had been saying on Sundays, ‘Are you leaving again?’ Galla’s has been a great opportunity to live out my faith in the Lord, and know I’m not alone.”

Tim Doyle, who was leading and facilitating the session, then asked Burke and Rice if they could walk through the evolution of how their professional world evolved during COVID to get involved in the things they wound up doing to serve others that they hadn’t before, like Compassion Kitchen.

“Early on, I thought, ‘This will be a couple weeks,’” said Burke. “That was not the case. Restaurants were forced to shut down. Fortunately, ours was not. Constant conversation with peers was around how to survive, but people wanted to work and serve.”

He added, “I was worried. Galla’s is not just a hobby, it’s a way to support my family and for my 20 employees to do so for their families. For those who had to lay off employees, you could see the pain in their face. Thank God for Gene’s wife and Lisa Blanco. Lisa approached me about the Compassion Kitchen program, and I loved it.”

Rice then chimed in.

“Picking up on the career piece,” said Rice to begin, “chef-driven restaurants are a significant part of our business.”

Rice then added, “Isabel and I got together in Atlanta in 2005, married in 2006, and started Adopt-A-Family in 2007. It began with 50-75 families and this year it hit 500 with a surplus of cash to give to Catholic Charities. When COVID hit, we started to get emails from Adopt-A-Family donors saying they give at Christmas, but what could be done now.”

For Rice, he said seeing this, and the grit of those in the industry along with that, was amazing.

“Lisa and Isabel were really the backbone of Compassion Kitchen. I just connected things on the front end with the restaurants.”

And what was the impact of Compassion Kitchen on Adopt-A-Family?

“We really weren’t sure what impact it would have on Adopt-A-Family, but it’s actually strengthened it,” said Rice.

As for the impact for Rice on a personal basis ...

"I'm really challenged by 'Be Still,'" said Rice, "but for the first two weeks I just sat in everything that was happening before doing something. The big lesson for me was being still and focusing on being aware of skill sets and thoughtfully putting that together with the community."

Doyle then asked Burke and Rice, "How's all this been with respect to family life?"

"For the boys, even down to the three-year-old, it's something that they can participate in," answered Rice. "We continue to do Compassion-to-Go bags for homeless shelters. My six-year-old just the other day said, 'We see homeless people when we're driving on the freeway. Throw a box of those in the truck so we can hand them out.'"

Burke followed Rice with a reflection of his own.

"In Buckhead, we live in a bubble," Burke shared. "This has been a great opportunity as a parent to get into giving back. My youngest has such a caring heart, in particular. Sometimes he'll want to stop, give something, and sometimes have a conversation or sometimes not. I would hope they're doing it out of love versus what their parents are saying to do."

Burke and Rice were then asked another question by Doyle.

"In 2020, how did you find hope, and what moments, if any, do you recall where that hope felt like it was challenged or perhaps lacking or in doubt?" asked Doyle.

"There was a deacon at CTK who once told me, 'Kevin, don't ask for things when you pray, ask for things for others,'" recalled Burke. "Come March, I wasn't asking God for trusting in His plan, but rather, what I needed."

Burke reflected further to add, "One thing that does give me hope is like today – every Tuesday we give out 60 family meals, which is for around 240 people. Customers will come in and ask, 'What are you doing?' It gives me hope that overwhelmingly people are gracious, recognize they're more fortunate than they thought, and can give. I see where that's really helped to reestablish my faith in humanity."

Rice went next to share his perspective.

"My wife will tell you, I'm an eternal optimist. I think the closest I came to losing hope was when I was in my backyard sometime in May of last year, and I had 12 COVID projects going on. In that moment, I lost faith that I'd finish them all, but that was the closest I came to losing hope."

Similar to Burke, Rice reflected further and shared an additional reflection related to those who helped make Compassion Kitchen possible.

"Having people step in like the Knights of Columbus who stepped in and said, 'We'll handle all the donations,' and then took care of the tax letters, getting funds, and more was great," said Rice. "That, and having others step in and play a role – that's very hopeful."

CTK Parishioner Wade Van Landingham then asked Burke and Rice, "What changes in your business have occurred do you think will stick, especially those that aren't so obvious?"

"I don't know if things will ever go back to the way they were," replied Burke. "I think there's certainly a focus on safety/health and being aware. I wasn't in a full-service space, so didn't have to pivot, but those that are full service are absolutely affected."

Rice commented after Burke by emphasizing two key changes he believes will stick.

"Folks like Umi, that would have never put their food outside their business, now are doing 'to-go' and specifically are doing the 'family meal' piece," Rice said. "I think these are here to stay. Also, Atlanta's great for having four full seasons, so patios have always been a thing but will be even more a thing (with investments by restaurants in outdoor heaters, and more)."

Additionally, Rice commented that there are also personal habits that have changed.

"A lot of businesses have learned a lot about themselves – including who was 'in the boat,' and who wasn't, due to the Unemployment Insurance benefits."

With Rice shifting the focus to a more personal space, Tara La Bouff, Director of Development and Communication at Ignatius House Retreat Center wondered what sort of trends Burke and Rice were seeing in terms of the spiritual needs of the employees they have and the people they serve.

"I see it at work," answered Burke. "I had an employee who was homeless for 7 years. When COVID hit, I told her I'd like to see her come back to work. Then recently she came to me and said she wanted to buy a house. 'Do you think I can do this?' she asked. I said, 'Absolutely.' I put her in touch with someone. Recently she said, 'I'm not afraid of failing, I've failed my whole life. I'm scared of succeeding.'"

Burke conveyed to everyone that in his world, all this sort of spiritual need and care isn't just from COVID; rather, it's the nature of the industry.

Rice followed by expressing his concern around the long-term mental health implications and needs he's witnessing "Where I got worried long-term, is when I went running with my wife early in COVID and as we passed someone, the person we passed literally dove in the bushes," he shared. "What worries me is when I realize that's what a person's going through. We can't live not to die. I hope there are people to talk to so folks don't fear that on a daily basis."

With the time in the session coming near an end, Wade Van Landingham had time to ask one final question, "How do you balance wanting to help people but you don't want to hinder them in doing so?"

Burke's response ...

"Are there people who don't need the Compassion Kitchen meals? I don't know. I'm not going to ask them. I don't think you can question people's needs. I think every person who works for me would make more money right now being on unemployment. Very thankful for them."

Then Burke made one more comment to close out the session.

"I'm in a struggle because people like me right now can't hire people to grow their business (due to the tradeoff in economics that still exists for many people)," he said. "I've had employees where I extended a helping hand, and they took advantage of me, and no longer work for me now. I'm disappointed in what they did, but it doesn't stop me from trying."