



**Chris Kocher** is the founder of [COVID-19 Survivors for Change](#) and **Veronica Ahumada** and **Whitney Parker** are members of the organization.

Here are key take-aways from their conversation with Ken Banta:

1. For COVID survivors, the pandemic will never be over. It will define their life.
2. Survivors are still navigating tremendous life changes and complex PTSD.
3. There have been few resources to support survivors.
4. Employers can help by acknowledging survivors and their needs in the workplace.
5. The best way to honor those we've lost is to be sure this never happens again.

### **Chris, what was your journey and how did it lead you to start *COVID Survivors for Change*?**

I worked for a decade in gun violence prevention, supporting families it impacted. When COVID hit New York City in that first awful wave last spring, I realized there were similar things I could do to support families impacted by COVID-19, help them speak out and fight for change. Thankfully, I've not had COVID-19, nor has my immediate family, but we knew people in our neighborhood who did.

We started in the heart of the nation with a remembrance event. Next, we launched weekly support groups led by grief counselors so people could have regular access to mental health professionals. Third, we launched training in advocacy, how to share your story, how to talk to media and how to do it all in a trauma-informed way so people could decide the best path forward for themselves and their families.

### **We appear to be at an inflection point, given vaccinations. Has your focus changed, or does it remain the same?**

**Even when the pandemic is over, millions of Americans will live with the grief of COVID; 40,000 of them are children who lost one or both parents.**

The pandemic may be coming to end, but there are still lots of unknowns. We're making some progress, but slowly. Vaccination rates are down and now we're dealing with variants.

COVID is not over. Even when the pandemic is, millions of Americans will live with the grief of COVID; 40,000 of them are children who lost one or both parents. Some Americans are living with long COVID themselves.

COVID changes almost week to week and, as it does, our focus will continue to be driven by the people who have been most directly impacted. We intend to be a strong resource and support for what they need and to help them advocate for the resources, remembrance and recognition they deserve.

**Veronica, let's turn to you and your story.**

Veronica Ahumada is a speech and language pathologist working with children with disabilities, a position that is very demanding and requires her to be focused and empathetic for long periods of time. Her husband is a chef. When COVID-19 caused restaurants to shut down, her husband lost his job immediately, her hours were significantly reduced and they faced tremendous financial stress.

**“I wish I could say financial stress was the worst of it.”**

In her words, “I wish I could say financial stress was the worst of it, but my dad got COVID-19 in October and died on December 4. On Valentine's Day in February of 2021, my uncle died. These deaths, our job losses and our finances were profound losses to work through. We're still navigating that and experiencing complex PTSD.”

**I'm very sorry to hear your story. Unfortunately, it sounds like others we've heard. Whitney, tell us about your experience and where you are now.**

Whitney Parker was widowed, with two children at the age of 30. In her words, “We're still unsure how COVID-19 attacked our family. We went ‘above and beyond’ to be safe, did not gather with others and ate healthy. Yet, five family members were in the hospital at the same time and the two youngest died, including my husband Leslie, who was our breadwinner.”

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“Then, I tested positive for COVID. Thankfully, I had no symptoms, but it attacked my gall bladder and two days after Leslie's death, I had emergency surgery to remove it. It's been really tough because there were no resources. As a cosmetologist, I get paid when I help a client, but salons were shut down. When they opened, I was still coping with Leslie's death and wasn't ready to go back to work.” There has been a clear impact on her children, as one might expect. Parker's youngest had his first birthday just 11 days after his father's death and will never remember his dad. Her oldest, who is ten, tries not to show her sadness because she wants to shield her mom.

“When someone dies from COVID, there's this whole plague thing, right? People shun you. It's almost like we got COVID because we wanted to have it.” People said unsupportive things, too. “Some older people who were widowed say I'll be fine, but they had 40 or 50 years together. We had only 11.”

Another came from people who asked if her husband had a pre-existing condition. “No, Leslie didn't. He was 31 and healthy. The news made it sound like young people were ‘all good.’ Even the doctors said that and told us we would be okay because we were 30. They wanted us to say home and fight it there. I'm the one who finally demanded he go to the hospital because I could tell he could not breathe.”

## **Veronica and Whitney, what message would you have for leaders about survivors?**

Both emphasized that survivors are living with complex PTSD that most people – including the survivors themselves – don't recognize. Just being aware of their level of profound grief and trauma can go a long way, especially since so many are experiencing it alone, without the support of traditional rituals and gatherings of people to help.

**“For me, the pandemic will never be over.”**

For example, just hearing news about the pandemic – especially stories that say the pandemic is over or lifting mask-wearing requirements or easing other restrictions – can trigger reactions for those who lost a loved one.

Ahumada said, “For me, the pandemic will never be over.” Parker described how easily she was ‘triggered.’ For example, she changed the ring tone on her phone and finds it difficult to listen to the ‘on hold’ music when she makes doctors’ appointments today because those are reminders of the time her husband was hospitalized and she got calls saying he would not recover. She said, “This experience has defined our life.”

Both indicated that acknowledgement about their reality from employers helps. When coworkers know others in the workplace are struggling to work through life-altering situations, they can be more sensitive. Ahumada was grateful for the three days of bereavement leave she received but, given the demands of her job in working with children with disabilities and the emotional giving that requires, she had a very difficult school year struggling to care for herself and the children. Since she was open about her losses, she felt able to ask for support from colleagues.

Parker was likewise grateful for her employer’s support. They’ve done videos for the Department of Health, discussed vaccinations at the salon and are considering supporting a vaccination site in, or close to, the salon. “At my [workplace](#), when I say, ‘we are a family’, we really are. The mask mandate has ended in our state, but my boss says we will wear masks until I say it is okay not to. She even searched for a vaccine for me because for the longest time I couldn't get it.”

Parker also believed education is important. “I feel that COVID has shown us how selfish some people can be. I did not get vaccinated for me only. I got it for people that aren't healthy enough to get it. I got it for my children who aren't old enough to get it. I want to protect the people I see every day and make sure they're safe because I've seen firsthand what COVID can do. It's a humanity thing. We're all in this together.”

## **How can the business leaders in our audience work with you and your team?**

According to Kocher, first and foremost, they should recognize they have employees who have had COVID-19 and some who have lost loved ones. It will help to think about where they’ve been working during the pandemic. If they've been in remote locations, what will their return to the workforce look like? What programs can they offer to support families who have been impacted? What resources or support can help? Kocher said, “I hope leaders recognize they have a unique role to play the policies that they craft. For example, they can offer paid time off so employees can get vaccinated. They can say getting vaccinated is their priority. They can require vaccination, proof of vaccination and continued mask-wearing.”

Kocher encouraged business leaders to recognize that, under the best circumstances, people have experienced tremendous challenges during the pandemic, with remote work, virtual schooling and disrupted caregiving. Even in the best of circumstances, those who did not lose a loved one to COVID-19 can feel overwhelmed.

In the worst of circumstances, people have experienced COVID-19 themselves, or the loss of one or several loved ones. They are left with deep grief and trauma. Leaders can engage them in thinking through how to make the workplace more “trauma-informed.” That’s the kind of thing we would be happy to help leaders do.

Finally, Kocher encouraged that, as a nation, we “take a deep dive” through a Commission or some other study mechanism to better understand how this devastation happened and how it can be prevented in the future. “The best way we can honor the lives that have been lost is to make sure this doesn't happen again.”

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#### **Chris Kocher**

Chris Kocher is the founder and executive director of [COVID Survivors for Change](#). He was also the co-creator of the [National COVID-19 Remembrance](#), an art installation and memorial to victims of COVID-19 that involved 20,000 empty chairs on the Ellipse in Washington, D.C. He previously launched and led the Everytown Survivor Network, a part of Everytown for Gun Safety, and the nation’s largest community of gun violence survivors working together to end gun violence. While at Everytown, he also helped launch the National Gun Violence Memorial. Chris is an attorney and first-generation college graduate of Cornell University and Duke Law.

#### **Veronica Ahumada**

Veronica Ahumada is a Speech-Language Pathologist in NC. Her dad, only 63 years old and who had just become a grandfather, died of COVID-19 on December 4th, 2020, and her uncle died from the virus on Valentine’s Day 2021. The family, spread out throughout the country, were unable to be together or to have funerals. Her husband also lost his job as an executive chef in March 2020 and struggled to find restaurant work. Veronica had her hours reduced and with complex medical conditions eventually had to take remote work to not put herself at risk.

#### **Whitney Parker**

Whitney Parker's husband Leslie died from COVID-19 on May 11, 2020 at the age of 31. Leslie has a 9-year-old daughter, Zuri, and a son, Chance, who turned one just 11 days after his daddy died. Leslie was the family breadwinner and worked in IT for a local Minneapolis school district. They didn't have life insurance through his job, which Whitney didn't realize until after Leslie died. Whitney works as a cosmetologist, and she is worried that, because the bills have begun piling up, she might have to move her and the kids out of their dream home. The home that houses the kids favorite place in the house. The basement that Leslie personally finished himself.

Leslie didn’t just take care of Whitney and their kids. He was the kind of guy who took care of everyone in his family. He didn’t ask questions: if he knew someone needed help, he was there. When Whitney gets angry about losing her husband to COVID and that he died all alone in a hospital, she looks at her children and tries to power through. “Leslie was exceptional and the kind of person that was too good for this earth. He was an Angel that walked among us for 31 years. Our family was hit several times by COVID.” Leslie’s older cousin passed 10 days before Leslie. His grandma and great aunt were hospitalized and another older cousin who spent nearly 8 months in the hospital fighting COVID complications. The two youngest in the family died from COVID. Whitney has severe asthma and was hospitalized shortly after Leslie’s death and almost missed the viewing of his body. Whitney is broken and there are so many pieces needed to put her back

together but sometimes feels it's impossible because those pieces died with Leslie. Whitney feels that her life will never be the same and hates that her children were robbed of their father. You can directly support Whitney [here](#).

### **COVID Survivors for Change**

COVID Survivors for Change is a national, non-partisan movement bringing together Americans who have had a loved one die from COVID-19, as well as those who have survived the virus and those whose lives have been dramatically altered by the pandemic. As part of COVID Survivors for Change, Americans are mobilizing to make sure that communities have the funding, resources and leadership in place to address future public health emergencies. Survivors will also find community and healing in meeting other people whose lives have been forever changed by the pandemic. For more information, please visit: [covidsurvivorsforchange.org](https://covidsurvivorsforchange.org). To access the organization's resources, visit: <https://covidsurvivorsforchange.org/survivor-resources/>

The national [COVID March to Remember](#) happening on August 7th across the country. COVID March to Remember will consist of Awareness & Action Marches and Gatherings across the United States on August 7th – where we will collectively take at least 615,000 steps to honor every life taken by COVID, raise awareness, call for public safety behaviors, and demand more action and support for COVID Survivors. Already more than 25 marches in 18 states have been organized and more than 16 covid groups have joined together to support.

Any individual supporters can [sign up for a march](#) or help us reach our goal of having 615,000 steps taken, or to request that their name or their loved ones name be carried across the Brooklyn Bridge by completing this [form](#).