

A Story About COVID-19, Fear, and a Comeback.

Jon Surman tested positive for COVID-19 in Tama, and shares his personal story about fear, faith, family, and the community.

A lot of people in town asked Jon Surman, General Manager at the Iowa Premium™ plant, if he was worried about contracting COVID-19.

“Well, it seems like everyone’s getting it, so I probably will, too,” was his response when this all began to unfold in early March.

He still took the necessary precautions, though. He would take off his work clothes, wash them separately from everything else, take a shower, and dress in clean clothes before hugging his kids and wife after another long day at work.

“My son was worried and kept asking me if I’d get it,” said Surman.

Initially, a person here and a couple people there at Tama tested positive and had to stay home. But as we all witnessed, over the course of a couple weeks, the virus tore through Iowa, and at its peak, our facility had many positives.

It hit the kill floor first, and by Saturday, April 4th, so many people were out that there were only three people in leadership roles remaining on the kill floor: a supervisor, a trainee, and Jon Surman.

“It was slow and steady. We made it through the day, barely. And by the end of it, we decided we needed to bump up the clean-up schedule and adjust from there,” said Surman.

Surman noticed he wasn’t feeling well that Saturday, and chalked it all up to allergies.

“On Sunday, I went fishing with my three boys. I felt pretty good, but about an hour into it I started getting chills,” he said.

Within a matter of hours, he was in bed with a 103 degree fever, sweating and cold at the same time. And overnight, he was making trips to the bathroom every thirty to sixty minutes. The kind of sickness where it feels relentless in its attack on the body.

“I had a horrible cough, and had to sleep sitting up so I could breathe,” he explained.

It wasn’t allergies.



Jon Surman, General Manager at Iowa Premium, shown here with Olatounde Fagbohoun, a three year employee in Slaughter at IP. Photo was taken in early spring, before the COVID pandemic. Face masks are now required in all NBP facilities.

He couldn’t keep anything down and had a blood oxygen level of 77-84. It was time to go to the hospital. He couldn’t even make it there without stopping on the side of the road a few times to get sick.

When he arrived, he was given fluids and sent home.

“I ended up having to go to the hospital twice for that,” he explained. “There just wasn’t anything else they could give me. There was no relief.”

There were trips to clinics and hospitals where Surman entered through back doors and wasn’t allowed to go the bathroom.

“It has been jolting to incite fear in others because of carrying a virus. It was a very lonely, isolating experience,” he said.

Surman, the calm, cool, collected leader type - as honest as the day is long - with a National Beef®-sized work ethic, was quarantined in his bedroom for 17 days. There was a lot of fear, missed moments with his personal and work families, and community support during those two and a half weeks.

“My son’s birthday was during that time. I remember getting out of bed, putting my mask on, cracking the door, and watching my three boys and wife eat birthday cake together. I wished him a happy birthday and went back to bed,” says Surman.

His boys and wife were scared. Like any family would be.

“There’s nothing like being locked in your room, sick, and hearing your eight-year-old boy pray for your life on the other side of the door,” says Surman.

No, there really isn’t.

But even then, Surman said, “I hate that I went through that, but a piece of me is glad. Glad that I experienced what so many others were going through and it gave me a first-hand understanding and empathy for what they were feeling and experiencing. And before I tested positive, I was able to be on the floor, handing out food and serving alongside the rest of the team, helping them as we all were experiencing the uncertainty of it all.”

He was going through the crisis alongside his team, and that mattered.

But in those 17 days there were a lot of conversations through cracked windows, FaceTime, and a whole lot of help.

“So many people messaged me and supported us during this time. My wife never had to go to the grocery store because neighbors and friends were constantly dropping off food and groceries on our porch,” Surman explained.

Many of those messages and calls came from Steve Thompson, Vice President, Operations.

“Steve called my wife every single day to check in. He would ask how I was doing and tell her to let me know the plant was fine, not to worry,” said Surman. “She wouldn’t even let me have my phone because she knew I’d try to work, and I just couldn’t. His care for us was unbelievable.”

About as unbelievable as the virus ripping through this small town in Iowa. But finally, Surman started to recover. The fever dropped, the cough went away, and his energy returned.

After Surman received the “ok” from the county health department to leave quarantine and his bedroom, the first thing he did was hug his wife and boys.

And then, of course, he wanted to head back to work.

“But Steve and Tammy Schuett (Industrial Nurse at Tama) told me to stay home for another week. Get my strength back,” he said.

That week was also the week that Tama was back on with production; even though they were operating at about 20% capacity.

The virus had forever changed Iowa Premium.

When Surman did come back, the Tama plant looked entirely different. In the two weeks the plant was down, contractors had installed plexiglass and stainless-steel dividers, tents for extra break and lunch space, infrared cameras, and everyone was wearing masks.

“I came back to a completely different facility,” said Surman. “I couldn’t believe it. The team that was there during the down time did an amazing job to get us prepared to deal with the pandemic and get back to running again.”

Surman has been back for weeks now. The first week was difficult, with fatigue and weakness settling in by noon each day. But gradually, it all came back to him. And his new normal arrived with it.

Today, Jon and the plant are both well. With fewer plant employees getting sick, attendance is at a historical high and production is back at full strength. Actually, at even higher levels than ever before.

But Tama County hasn’t fully bounced back. And because Jon and everyone at the Tama plant have already navigated these choppy and uncertain waters, they’re standing ready to lift up their community.

They’ve met with the Chamber of Commerce, City Council, Food Pantries, and school boards. They’re donating beef, delivering food, and putting their heads together to bring the county back to life.

Because through the fear came the realization that faith, family, relationships, and community would emerge stronger.