

Interview with Aaron Zsebery
Wednesday, March 23, 2022
The Hill Cumorah Legacy Project

Interviewee: Aaron Zsebery
Interviewer: Caitlin Quinn
Questions developed by Caitlin Quinn and Luke Miller
Transcription by Caitlin Quinn and Luke Miller
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Transcript

[0:00]

Caitlin Quinn

Hi, this is Caitlin Quinn. I'm interviewing Aaron Zsebery. It's March 23, 2022, at 5:11, and we are recording remotely. We are here to discuss the Hill Cumorah Pageant. Okay, so my first question is, what is your history with the Church? Were your parents members? Or did you convert later in life?

Aaron Zsebery

Um, both my parents converted as late teenagers. And then they met at BYU, and then moved back to New York. Been going to pageants since... long as I can remember. I was in it in cast in 2013, or in, 20—sorry, in 2003. I was in it as staff from 2013 till the end, and I helped with the dispersal [in 2021]. And then we were in as a with my family, my kids, in 2019 for the final show.

Caitlin Quinn

So, you talked about how you were in the Pageant. How did you become involved? And what aspects of the event were you most drawn to?

Aaron Zsebery

Well, for 2003, I was—when I was in cast, I applied because I wanted to be in it. I'd actually wanted to be in work crew. But I wasn't. [Caitlin laughs] I didn't get selected for work crew. So instead, I got selected for cast. In 2013, I remember, the Pageant Presidency called me and asked me if I'd be interested in doing tents. I live relatively near the Pageant. And from then on, I did the tents for the cast teams, that the cast teams would meet in when they weren't in rehearsals. We had 40-something tents we'd set up every year. They were 20x20, 20x30, or 20x40 tents. And most of them by the Pageant, a few rentals. And then we'd have—the Saturday before the cast would show up, we would have a crew of people usually from either Owego or Plattsburgh, I think, the last couple of years would come to help set things up. And they would put in all the stakes and set up all the tents, as well as setting up a lot of the security fencing, putting out chairs for the cast, the [unclear] for the cast, that kind of stuff.

Caitlin Quinn

Since you're from the Rochester area, how do you feel the Pageant affected the local community, and the local non-Mormon community? Did these effects change over time?

Aaron Zsembery

I know for a lot, like with the Lions Club and the Rotary, they had their big fundraising events there. And that was pretty much the only fundraising that they needed to do. I know that that, from what I—from talking to people in the area, that significantly helped with a lot of people who otherwise didn't like that many people coming into town to see the Pageant and leave. And I think that the Pageant ending and the loss of cast being in town for those two weeks, as well as whatever loss of tourism there, ends up being, I think it's definitely going to—I think that's one of the reasons, for example, why the Breen's supermarket in Palmyra closed. Because that was, I

think, a big piece that kept open, because that was for many people, if they were staying at Palmyra, that was the most convenient place to go to get food or to get supplies, should we say.

Caitlin Quinn

Mhmm.

Aaron Zsebery

So, that being closed made a big difference for them, I think. Otherwise, I'm—my personal guess is that, once everything settles out from COVID and stuff, tourism will be back probably around 80% [best guess] of where it was in 2018, [05:00] but it'll be spread out across the whole summer rather than packed into the two weeks that Pageant's running.

Caitlin Quinn

Your family was also involved in the pageants. What year did they start attending the Pageant? When did—and can you just discuss how being in the Pageant with your family was a good experience?

Aaron Zsebery

I think they enjoyed it, if you asked them, because they were at the time—er, what would they have been? Five, seven, and nine turning ten. They would have told you that it took way too much of their device time [laughter], and they didn't want to go in and do it again. They did pretty well; they enjoyed it. I think they all had friends in it. They started going, I mean, they went as babies because it's not too bad of a run from our house to where Pageant is. So, they've gone to see it. They've helped, you know, they were helping set up tents and—or, maybe not set up, but mark out tents, because we'd set up the tents on Saturday, but on Friday, we'd get a group [of] people local, and we would go and layout where each tent went and put a dot of spray paint for each pole and each stake, and so they would carry the cans of spraying—of paint. As

they got older, they would mark where the paint went, and they would help for at least the first little bit of setting up the tents. They greatly enjoyed their roles being in Pageant, I think.

Whether or not they would have liked to do it—to have done it again, I don't know. Our original plan was that we were going to be in it once they were teenagers and could really enjoy it. But, with the announcement that it was going to be ending, we decided to apply to be in it for 2019. Previous to that, I had just been in it and just—I wasn't there full time. I would go there before work, and I would go and stop by after work, check on tents, and often help with emptying the parking lot after Pageant, that kind of stuff.

Caitlin Quinn

Relating to kids, do you think the Pageant is a positive way for children within the faith to learn about the stories? Or the Book [of Mormon]?

Aaron Zsebery

Yes, I think it is. They had the kids that were in the eight and younger group, they did the Primary and had a mini-Pageant that they did. So, they went, and they each had their own little assignments, and they had makeup and costumes, and they did it for—they performed that for the cast, which was really cute.

Caitlin Quinn

Hmm.

Aaron Zsebery

But I think it helped them to kind of see it and put it all together. But I—if we go—when we watch the—or, when we watch the recording from the 2019 [Pageant], they can point out exactly where they were in the different scenes and where they were waiting to go on for those scenes, and all that.

Caitlin Quinn

You've been a cast tent master, a tent master, a cast member, and an attendee for the Hill Cumorah Pageant. Looking back, is there a role you had or a period during your Pageant experience that shines especially bright?

Aaron Zsembery

Personally, I think my two favorite days were the days the tents went up and the days that the tents went down every year. Because, you know, when—the day that the tent went up, I'd be down there somewhere around seven, eight, and it just be an open field. And by lunchtime, we would have tents every 10 feet on that, or 15 feet on that, or on the perimeter of the pieces of the field. And just how fast it went up, how happy everyone was working on it. And the same for taking them down, you know. We would have—because the goal was to take them down on the last Friday of Pageant. It seemed like the past four or five years, every year there, the plan was they were going to come down around two o'clock, and [it] seemed like every year there's a rainstorm that was supposed to come through at [10:00] two o'clock. So, at 12:30, we'd start taking them down, and they would be down in half an hour and in bags, and I would bring them—and we'd put them in the totes that they got stored in, for the trailers outback. So, it was always amazing watching them go up and come down and watching, you know, the people working together, having fun together, as they put them up, as they took them down. And, you know, it was always—also interesting because I was walking through the tents, keep checking on them, usually in the evening. And just seeing the different groups, how at the beginning of Pageant you'd have cast teams that are kind of standoff-ish, one here, one there. And then, by the end, they were all close friends. Right? I like to say that Pageant was like a family reunion with the most interesting family you've never met before.

Caitlin Quinn

Do you still keep in contact with people that you were in the Pageant with, or participated with?

Aaron Zsebery

Some of them. I'm in—there's a Facebook group for former cast members. I'm in that. There's some who I'm friends with, who, you know, are in the area who I see from time to time. There's some I text or message back and forth with on occasion. It all depends on the person. There's some that stick out more than others.

Caitlin Quinn

Mhmm. How did you feel about the ending of the Pageant? I know that you helped with Pageant dispersal last year [in 2021]. How was that experience?

Aaron Zsebery

It was nice. I think I met, or I met up with, a significant portion of the people who I knew from the area that were there to help with the dispersal, and also other people from the area, some people who had been accepted into the cast for the last year and weren't able to be in it, which was somewhat sad for them. And some people who were in the Church from the area who had never [really]—they had been to Pageant, but they had no real idea how big everything was behind the scenes to make Pageant work. You know, I think for a lot of people that was a surprise, seeing how much stuff there was to be dispersed. There was—in the stuff that got moved, or that was out back in the trailers, there was 15 or 20 semi-trailers, I think?

Caitlin Quinn

Mhmm.

Aaron Zsebery

And then, between the costumes, the props, all the stuff that was there for the primary for—to keep the kids busy. The administrative stuff, you know. There was TVs and computers and barcode scanners and printers and this, that, and the other thing, and there's a whole bunch of stuff like that that [you] wouldn't really think of until you saw what it actually took to put it on behind the scenes.

Caitlin Quinn

Do you have any final reflections on the Pageant now that it's over?

Aaron Zsembery

I think it'll be missed. I mean, seeing the people, meeting random people who I've seen at Pageant before that I made friends with and then lost track of, seeing them again, that will be missed. Having 700–800 people in the sacrament meeting on Sunday—in a way, that'll be missed. In a way, that won't be missed. You know, I think having the tourism spread out a little bit more will make it a little nicer—a little less traffic and the roads plugged up and that kind of stuff during Pageant. But at the same time, I think it'll—I miss going to it. Normally, this time of year, I'd be working with the casting director, figuring out roughly how many people were assigned to each cast team, which tent goes where. Because, you know, the smaller cast team could get one of the 20x20 tents, but the bigger ones or the younger kids would get a bigger tent because, if it's raining, you don't want 15 ten-year-olds underneath a 20x20. [15:00] There's just not enough space. You need a 20x30, for example. So, just interacting with people and the people who make friendships with, that I'll definitely miss.

Caitlin Quinn

Do you think the Pageant had a positive effect on—I might have already asked this, but—a positive effect on the community in Rochester? And do you think it made nonmembers of the Church more interested about the Church?

Aaron Zsebery

Curious? Yes. Interested? Some. I know some people who have joined the Church or investigated [best guess] the Church because of the Pageant, or because the protesters at Pageant—because they're curious why they're protesting. I know, I mean, half the people at work had questions of one kind or another about Pageant, when they heard it was closing, about why it was closing, that kind of stuff. But I don't—like, with most of them, I don't think it hasn't really gone past just, you know, what's changed, why they want to close it. Why not continue, that kind of thing.

Caitlin Quinn

Okay. I think that's all the questions I have for you. Thank you for participating.

Aaron Zsebery

Okay.

Caitlin Quinn

Have a nice day.

Aaron Zsebery

Thank you very much! You, too.

Caitlin Quinn

Yeah, no problem.

Title:

Interview with Aaron Zsembery, Wednesday, March 23, 2022

Subject:

Hill Cumorah Project, Tent Master

Description:

Digital History student Caitlin Quinn interviews Aaron Zsembery on his history with the Hill Cumorah Pageant. The first question asked is how Aaron came to be a Mormon. The remainder of the questions are focused on Aaron's past involvement in the Hill Cumorah Pageant and his feelings about the Pageant coming to an end. His responses reveal the particulars of being the tent master of the Pageant, how his family was affected by the Pageant and the effects it had on the surrounding area, the role children played in the Pageant, the connections he made with others throughout his years of involvement, the complexities of the dispersal of the Pageant in 2021, and what the dispersal of the Pageant means for him going forward.

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Aaron Zsembery and Caitlin Quinn

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