

PGTPL COVID-19 Pandemic Oral History Transcript

Interviewee: Doug Huff

Interviewer: Jeannine Spurgin

Date: November 10, 2020

Location: Plainfield, Indiana

Abstract: Doug Huff is the owner of The Oasis Diner in Plainfield, Indiana. He tells about his experiences as a restaurant owner during the pandemic.

JS: Today is Tuesday, November 10, 2020. This is Jeannine Spurgin, and I'm speaking with Doug Huff, who is the owner of the Oasis Diner, here in Plainfield, and we're going to talk to him about his business experience during the pandemic. How are you doing, Doug?

DH: I'm doing well.

JS: Great. So, you are the owner of the business, right?

DH: Correct.

JS: It's a restaurant, right?

DH: Yes, it's a full-service restaurant.

JS: First of all, let me just ask you, when you first heard about the pandemic, what were your thoughts?

DH: I was kind of skeptical at first. I just didn't know exactly what to expect with it. It was an election year, so I didn't know if the results were overhyped or underhyped, or what exactly. So, I was a little skeptical to begin with, not knowing a lot of the details of it.

JS: How did your thoughts change during the lockdown and the pandemic itself?

DH: Well, I realized that it was definitely something that needed to be addressed and dealt with, and there were just a lot of questions that needed to be answered. I still think it was definitely used for political reasons on both sides, that over-hyped thing got people a little excitable over it, but it was definitely something that once we got through it, kind of understood who was vulnerable to it, those were the folks who needed to be protected, more so than others, and that kind of thing. Just working through it and gaining more information on the virus was helpful in processing it.

JS: The restaurants were obviously so hard-hit with this.

DH: Yes.

JS: What were your feelings when you were told that you had to close your restaurant?

DH: It was pretty devastating, because we're actually, this is the fifth year that we've owned the diner. The first three years with a new business, you're usually not profitable, you're just trying to figure things out, and then year four and five on, you start to make profit, and this was going to be a really good profitable year for us, and our numbers were well above the previous years starting out in January, February, March; and then we got the news that we had to shut down, I looked at my manager, and we were like "Man, we were going to have a really good year." And we just knew that this was going to be devastating to our sales, and we were just kind of hopeful, you know, that maybe it was just a couple weeks, starting out. They were just kind of talking, a couple weeks to flatten the curve and get everything ready...the hospitals and all that kind of stuff. And then it just kind of kept going on and on, and we really didn't know when we were going to be able to open.

JS: How long were you closed completely?

DH: Well, we were never closed completely. We were always allowed to do take-out and offer delivery service. But our dining room was shut down for a little over two months. So, how did the pick-up and carry-out all work out for you? Did it keep you going, or did it really not help at all?

JS: It actually really helped. We had really never done any delivery services, and we'd never really pushed our takeout business, but it was always kind of in the back of my mind that I actually really wanted to start looking into delivery services because I knew it was kind of a new thing that was going to stick around, it's kind of what people were asking for. So, I'd always kind of planned on offering those services in the future, so this kind of just expedited that for me to go ahead and get that set up and implemented. And we probably still did about 30-40% of our normal business with takeout and delivery services, so I was actually pretty pleased that we were able to do that much business. We actually retained all of our employees during that time. I went ahead and paid them, but just brought them in sporadically to do some cleaning, and to help with takeout and delivery orders, and that kind of stuff. That actually was a real good thing for us, that we were able to continue to do takeout and delivery.

JS: That was one of my next questions - how your employees fared. So, you kept them the whole time, huh?

DH: Yes, I took out a line of credit that I already had established, and we had about 25 employees at the time. I told them that I didn't want to have to let everybody go, and re-hire everybody when we opened back up, so I was going to pay everybody as if nothing had changed. I wanted them to stick with us because I needed them back when we opened back up. And then, when the PPE loans came available, I was able to apply for that and reimburse myself for the line of credit. So then, when we were able to open our dining room back up, we brought every single employee back. I was very pleased to be able to do that. That was a really cool thing.

JS: I was going to ask you, too, you were able to take advantage of the PPE program?

DH: Yeah. We had a great experience with that. We worked with our local bank, Hendricks County Bank, and they actually reached out to me before I reached out to them. So, they were very, very helpful through this whole process, and the loan process for me, I know it's not everybody's experience, but for me it was a very easy process. We got our money really quickly, so that was a great thing.

JS: That is great. You're back open full time, right?

DH: Correct.

JS: At the time of this recording, we're experiencing another surge, and even more instances of people getting it and dying. I don't believe we're going to close down again - how do you think this is going to affect your business? Are you just going to keep doing your business and going along as you are? Or are you preparing for another shutdown?

DH: No, as of right now, I'm planning on continuing business as usual. I tend to let my customers tell us what they're comfortable with. Because I feel like if someone's not really comfortable being out, then they're not going to go out and eat. So, if someone is comfortable with it, then obviously they're going to go out and eat. So, we kind of let our customers tell us what they're comfortable with. Obviously, we're a restaurant, so you'll always have standards you have to meet as far as sanitation goes, so we've always done that. We've always been known as a clean restaurant; we get a lot of comments and compliments on that. But, our servers still wear masks, and we still social distance as best as we can, so we'll just continue with that, as long as the government tells us we can do that.

JS: How is business? Has it come back to normal, or is it still kind of slow?

DH: Honestly, we had our best summer we've ever had!

JS: Unbelievable!

DH: Our community has been so supportive of us, and just with the addition of the pushing of the takeout and delivery services with our regular business, we've had our best summer ever.

JS: Speaking of the community, how do you feel the community leaders have responded to the pandemic?

DH: I've been pleased with our local officials. I've talked to the Hendricks County Health Department. Just when they started the mask mandate, I was very concerned about that, because you hear stories about customers and businesses getting into arguments, and I told them that I do not want to put my employees in a confrontational situation with our customers. And she said, "You know, you can't be expected to be the ones to enforce the mask mandate." And for the most part, people have worn their masks when they come in. We haven't had any issues with it. So, that was my concern. I kind of felt like maybe the state level was wanting the businesses to be the enforcers of their mask mandate, and I didn't think that was right. But our local officials were understanding of the situation we were in, and were willing to work with us in that way. So, I've been pleased with them on the local level.

JS: You mentioned before that you kind of feel like it's been overblown. Do you feel like a lot of other business owners in the area feel that way, too?

DH: The ones I've talked to, for the most part, I think would agree with that. And overblown, I mean, just because there's a high survival rate, and there are portions of our society that are more susceptible to it, obviously, the elderly and those that have pre-existing health conditions. And so I think there are a lot of people that don't understand that your risk of dying from it is still very small. And I think that should be talked about a lot more than it is. The negative part of it is what people focus on in the media, and that kind of frightens people more than it should. That's just my opinion on that.

JS: I'm assuming that, as a business owner, you have a lot of contact with municipal and government officials here. Do you think they are being reasonable about it?

DH: Yes.

JS: So you think the local government is doing well. What do you think about national government?

DH: The national government, I think, did it properly by letting the states handle it, just because we had spikes in New York, and they didn't have one in the Dakotas, and that kind of thing. I think the national government should put out guidelines, and I think the state government should adjust those guidelines according to what their situation is. Because it's not the same across the country. My philosophy is that how our country is set up is that our states have their individual say in how they operate their state. So, I think the way that was handled was proper. I don't necessarily agree with the mask mandate, but I understand why they did it. I thought that was kind of an overreach, and I think the state should just give you guidelines and let the individuals figure that out for themselves. That's just my opinion on that.

JS: Have any of your employees contracted the virus?

DH: No, they have not. I'm shocked that we haven't. We've been basically an essential business, and we've kind of been out in the middle of it ever since it started. We have had a couple of our high school students that have been quarantined based on the protocol at the high school, but they haven't actually contracted it themselves.

JS: What do you plan to do if one of your employees do contract it?

DH: Well, it'd basically be based on the situation - when they started their symptoms, when they were tested, when their last day of work was, and just kind of going from there, who we think was exposed to it. But we haven't had to deal with it, but it would be on a case-by-case basis.

JS: Wow, that sounds messy!

DH: Yeah, I know. That's why I hope it doesn't happen.

JS: Ok. One last question. Knowing what you know now, what do you think businesses, communities, and government should keep in mind for the future?

DH: That's a great question. I think, in hindsight, if I was actually in charge, knowing what we know now, I would say...my parents are elderly, my dad just turned 79 years old yesterday, my mom's in her mid-70s and a stroke patient, and they're susceptible to this. They stayed at home and they've been very cautious, and they're cautious every flu season because they know that it's not good for them to get sick. So, I would emphasize that our elderly population needs to stay home as much as they possibly can, and when they're out, they need to wear a mask. And the same thing for those that are at high risk. And I think if we just focus on those folks in our community that were at very high risk, that's where the focus should have been. And not just kind of putting a blanket policy over everybody. Because you don't typically quarantine healthy people, you quarantine sick people. That's kind of what my approach would have been. I'm sure there's obviously arguments for both ways, and I understand that. And I'm not a proponent of shutting down the economy or shutting down businesses, obviously being a business owner. I think the mental harm that comes from something like this far outweighs the physical harm. Obviously, the hundreds of thousands of deaths we have had are nothing to take lightly, but I think there's been a lot more damage done that people aren't aware of, or even will be aware of for some time because of the mental aspect of this. So, that's something I think we need to be more careful about, and understanding, when we try to shut things down. I think work is important to people's mental health. You know, you have to have that interaction with people, you have to have that purpose in life. And I think those are things that aren't deemed as important, sometimes, as they should be.

JS: That's a good perspective. Do you have any other bits of wisdom you might want to impart to folks who are going to be listening to this in a hundred years?

DH: No, I think I've pretty much covered it. It's definitely been an interesting year. 2020 will always be remembered as an interesting year, but I'm a huge Los Angeles Dodgers fan, and we just won the World Series, so there's that!

JS: Well, at least, somebody had a good year!

DH: Exactly right!

JS: Alright, thank you so much for participating.

DH: Thank you very much.