

PGTPL COVID-19 Pandemic Oral History Transcript

Interviewee: Heva Espay

Interviewer: Jeannine Spurgin

Date: November 17, 2020

Location: Plainfield, Indiana

Abstract: Heva Espay is a resident of Brownsburg, Indiana, as well as a restaurant owner in Plainfield, Indiana. She talks about the issues surrounding running a restaurant during the pandemic.

JS: It's Tuesday, November 17, 2020. This is Jeannine Spurgin, and I'm speaking to Heva Espay, an owner of Nonna's By So Italian, here in Plainfield. She is also a resident of Brownsburg. We're going to talk to her about her restaurant's experience during the COVID-19 2020 pandemic, how things went down for them. Hi Heva!

HE: Hi!

JS: When you first heard about the COVID-19 virus, what were your thoughts? What did you think?

HE: Well, when we first started hearing about it, I was actually pretty concerned, and I took it seriously. I still do, but I took it really, really seriously. I mean, even coming home, once everything started to close down, and they closed us down, I remember, at home, we were taking off our shoes before we went inside, we had our slippers right by the door. We were washing our hands before we came inside the house; there's a sink right in the mudroom. So, we were washing our hands, taking off our outer layers, and then going upstairs and changing into our home clothes. We were taking it seriously and not letting anything come in the house, and same thing with the restaurant. And I was very worried, I thought...I mean, so many things were running through my head... I didn't know how it would affect society, because I would see, at the beginning, everybody was going out and buying out all the toilet paper, and water, and necessities like that. And so I was seeing it kind of slowly declining. I remember going to the store one time, just for a regular run, and people were like, "Don't let them touch your cart!" And I was like, "Oh my gosh!" So, in a personal way, I was like, "Oh my gosh, society is going to go crazy! And it's going to be anarchy," you know, things that run through your head when you see stuff like that. Yeah, I took it very seriously.

JS: Did you guys anticipate the fact that you were going to have to close down dining for so long?

HE: Well, I didn't think so, because I didn't think the state would do that, but it was one of those, you know, worse situation kinds of things that run through your head as you're faced with circumstances like this. We didn't, but I remember the first week that they had just shut us down - that Monday, they said, "Ok, starting tomorrow, no dining at all." At first we thought they were going to shut us down completely, then we understood that we could stay open for carryout,

because we were still considered essential, as we provide food. So, we were allowed to stay open for carryout, but we thought we were going to be just dead anyways. We didn't know, and that affected our whole buying process. We didn't want to buy a whole lot of fresh produce, and lots of anything at all that we sold, actually. I remember that first week, I was like, "We're going to be so slow." And it was pretty slow, but that Friday... I was so concerned, for some reason there was a rumor going around that they were going to shut us down completely, not even any carryout. And I think that's what most people thought. And that Friday, we were slammed. We were so slammed, we had a line of people...it was so crazy. We couldn't keep up, because, not only were we low on staff, we were low on supplies, because we didn't want to buy a lot and then have to close down for good. And so, we were just (inaudible) everything, and I think the community was so... It was a rough night in the fact that there was a lot of people who had to wait over an hour, and there was a lot of people who got the wrong thing because we were so slammed, and we couldn't find their orders...it was something that we had never seen. I was in the kitchen helping them out, but once I could go out and talk to the customers, like, "Look, I'm so sorry," you know. I was going out there trying to offer other savings and giving out coupons, or "hey, can I do this for you," something like that. And they were like, "No, we just want to make sure that you're open after all this over." And it was like, "Wow, they came out to support local," and I think that's something that Brownsburg and Plainfield, and really all of Hendricks County, does really well, is that they're really all about supporting local business, which is amazing. Because there are a lot of amazing local restaurants, and local supermarkets, just local places you can go support, and I think it's great that they thought of us during that time. I'm still very sad about the people that left unhappy that night because of having to wait an hour, and everything like that, but I was very touched that they were all worried about supporting local and making sure we were open. And not just us, I'm sure, all the other local restaurants...

JS: I've seen some of those videos of these so-called "Karens" freaking out because they had to wait an hour for their food at other places. Have you seen those?

HE: I have.

JS: So, I guess you're not the only ones that had to deal with that, huh?

HE: Yeah, those give me anxiety!

JS: So, I'm assuming that your business changed a great deal during this time. Can you give us an overview of how it changed?

HE: We did. We didn't have a super fancy business, by any means, but we had servers, and you were waited on at the table, hosts that took you to the table, and we tried to have a nice atmosphere. We always did a lot of family weddings, where the full ceremony and reception is done at the restaurant. Receptions and bridal showers, birthdays, and anniversaries - it was a nice place to have that. But, we changed our service, because we have a lot of restrictions - we can't leave anything on the tables like shakers, we can't leave anything on the tables, really. We had a lot of other restrictions, like you had to have a new cup every time that you refill a drink, and things like that. So, with this system, we're no longer serving at the table, but you order at the counter when you come in, then you sit down and we'll take it out to you. And we struggled a lot, not only because we changed our system because of restrictions, but because we couldn't have as many workers on at a time. Some people just couldn't work anymore, or something like

that. Sometimes I have people that are quarantined; they'll call me, "Hey look, I got tested" or "I got contact-traced, so I have to quarantine." Even if they don't have any symptoms, they have to quarantine for two weeks, and I don't have that employee for two weeks. And, sometimes it happens for two or three at a time that have to be out, so this system helps it where if I'm low on staff, I can still take care of multiple tables at the same time. Whereas, before with waiters, if I was low on staff, it was very difficult for one or two people to take care of the dining room. Now, with this system, when you order up at the counter, right as soon as you order and pay, that ticket gets sent to the kitchen. So, sometimes, if you order a salad and appetizer or something, sometimes when you're getting your drink, your salad is already ready, because they got your ticket right away. So, it makes it really easy for one or two servers to be out on the floor, taking care of multiple tables, taking it out, and knowing where everything goes, and that sort of thing. We've tried to make it kind of a hybrid. We struggled at first...I don't think my employees understood that you have to still go check on the table as if you were a server, and make sure they're okay, because they're expecting someone to come, and they don't understand...especially if they're used to our old service. And definitely, we struggled...some people left really unhappy, and we've kind of fixed it where now, we always go and check up on them after we've delivered their food - "hey, can I get you a refill, can I do this, or are you missing anything?" We have tablets now, so we can go to the table and order there, and they can pay with the tablet.

JS: Do you anticipate keeping this model after everything is all taken care of?

HE: We anticipate keeping this model definitely for lunch, because it helps everything move so much faster, and people that have a really tight lunch schedule, we can really get their food out in five minutes or so. So, we really want to keep it for lunch. We are still thinking about hopefully for dinner, around five p.m., we can switch over to servers, just to have a nicer dinner experience.

JS: Obviously restaurants were one of the hardest hit because of this. Were you guys able to take advantage of the PPE program?

HE: We were. We got a lot of hand sanitizers and supplies and things through that program.

JS: So, the impact of the virus on your business was obviously great. Did you ever worry that you would have to close the restaurant permanently because it's just not doable anymore?

HE: Yeah, that definitely ran through my mind. That was definitely something that, should we...because we have two businesses, one in Brownsburg and one in Plainfield... The one in Brownsburg before COVID was only doing a lot of carryout, it's kind of built for that. But our main source of income for the restaurant in Plainfield was dining and events, parties, weddings, and that was our main source of income. So, I was really worried in the beginning. But I think that, in general, the trend the past couple of years, especially because of Doordash and Uber Eats, and all these other services that have popped up, I think the trend was already moving more towards carry out of food that can be done fast and can be taken and delivered and still taste good...food that can still taste good after 30 minutes in a car getting to your house. So I think that's something we were already seeing, and with COVID, I think that was tremendously pushed.

JS: I've heard that from other folks, that it kind of accelerated the carryout thing.

HE: It definitely accelerated carryout, and not just carryout dinner, but carryout groceries, and these programs that will send you what you need to make dinner. So that's been a lot bigger, and I think the restaurants that have suffered the most during this time are restaurants that were full service restaurants. I mean, if you think, "Hey, I'm going to go grab dinner, but I want it to go or I'm picking it up, you don't think, "I'm going to go to a fancy steakhouse and get it to go," and come home with a steak. But you think of something that's going to taste good in 20-30 minutes, and something that's going to be relatively cheaper; so I think those are the restaurants that suffered. And a lot of my favorite restaurants that I love going to are closed, at least for now, and who knows when they'll reopen. And it's really sad.

JS: What restaurants are you referring to?

HE: Sullivan's, at Keystone.

JS: Sullivan's Steakhouse? My gosh, I haven't been there in 20 years!

HE: I love that place. In fact, my family loves that place. I went to the mall a few weeks ago, and I parked at Sullivan's, because you can never get any parking at Keystone. There were no cars, and they had signs up - multiple signs, so it was confusing. One was like, "we're not open until this," or "we're only open for carryout," and one was like, "we're opening again!" I didn't see anybody, and it was weird. And there was this other fabulous, fabulous restaurant where I used to get dumplings, and stuff - I can't remember their name right now.

JS: They're Indianapolis restaurants, then?

HE: Yeah, they're Indianapolis restaurants. And they just closed down for good.

JS: Oh, that's too bad.

HE: I know, it's terrible. In fact, my family goes out to eat every Sunday after church, and we always try to make a point to eat local; the Indian restaurant in Plainfield is delicious, and the owners are very nice. I think it's the only Indian restaurant in town.

JS: Oh, Indian Bistro?

HE: India Bistro, yes. Fabulous.

JS: They're closed?

HE: No, they're not closed. I was just saying that they're really good.

JS: Speaking of trends, obviously business went flat during the lockdown. Now, here we are in November, cases are surging, everything is getting almost worse than it was back then, but nobody is closing down. How is your business doing? Do you have pretty steady business, or a loss of business?

HE: We're definitely seeing again...now, like this past week I was pretty slow for dine-in, but I had a lot of carryout, and I had a lot of orders through Doordash. And so, this week we're going to have some carryout specials, but I have seen a trend where, I mean, I saw in the Fall, I finally saw my sales climb up a little bit and getting a little more steady, they're staying the same, we're doing pretty good for dining in. And then, this past week, I just saw a lot of decline for dine-in... a decline, in general, I think, because of all this that has popped up. I have some kids that were like "Hey, I just got contact-traced" ... you know, they go to high school... "I just got contact-traced so I can't work for a couple weeks." So, I see that stuff coming up again, which I haven't seen in a month or so.

JS: Cases are surging really bad. It's going to get ugly, I guess. But isn't it interesting, though, that nothing's really closing down. Obviously, that's good for your business. But, IS it good for your business?

HE: I don't know. I'm very grateful that people are still going out, and I think our community really wants to make things seem as normal as possible. But, I don't know, maybe people are almost over it! I have had people in my life...not super close, nobody in my immediate family or people I live close to, or my friends... but I have had people like, maybe, someone I know at church or a family member from another state, that I know have had COVID. So, I know it's real, I'm not trying to minimize what it is, but I don't see it near me, and so it's harder to kind of keep that in perspective; I don't want to minimize that either because I feel like it's such a blessing, too, that it hasn't happened near me. But yeah, I think maybe some people are just like, "You know, I just want to move on with my life, and I want to do this; it's kind of gauging like "I don't want to hurt the community, I want to still go out, but I also want to keep everyone safe." So, it's about keeping that balance, and I think a lot of people are struggling with that, myself included.

JS: How about local government? How you feel they've handled this situation? Especially with regard to you guys.

HE: I think Hendricks has been really great. I don't have any complaints.

JS: What about masks? Have you had any problems enforcing mask rules, or anything like that?

HE: No, not really. Most of my customers come in with a mask and then they take them off when they get to their table, which is what they're supposed to do. I don't really have to remind them of that. I actually can't think of a time that someone has come in without a mask. I think I've had maybe one customer. I've seen videos of people who refuse to wear a mask, and then, "No, you can't come inside," and blah blah. I've been so nervous to handle it, I'm like, "Please don't let me handle something like that!"

JS: That's my next question. How do you think you would handle that if it happens...if somebody's really argumentative. Are you prepared to tell them to leave, or would you back down? How would you handle it?

HE: I think I would just have to offer an alternative, you know. Like, I have a mask if you don't have one on you. Or, my offering to serve you out in the car, you know. I've actually had people

that park, and then they will call me on the phone, and they'll order and ask if we can bring it out to the car. And I have the tablet so they can pay at the car, too. And they will either take that to go, or eat in the car. I haven't asked them to do that, it's just their choice. And so, I probably would offer something like that. And that's not even a personal restaurant rule, that's just the rule that was put in place by the government. I have to follow those rules or I get shut down. So, that's something that...I will get shut down, and I don't want to get shut down. Because everybody has a different opinion. I try to be welcoming to everyone, because I don't want to...but I get shut down if everyone's not wearing a mask. All of my employees are wearing masks, I am, and you do too, I'm sorry, that's just the cards we were dealt.

JS: Have any of your employees gotten COVID?

HE: Yes. I have an employee that tested positive for COVID.

JS: What do you do when an employee gets the virus?

HE: They have to quarantine, so I'm like, "You cannot come in." I had a meeting with all of them when all this started to go on, and told them, "If you have any symptoms that may possibly be related, like fever, any loss of taste, something that is flu-like, you need to call me. Do not come in, call me first. And they've been doing that. I've never had someone come in who had flu symptoms or anything. They always stay home and call me.

JS: Do you worry about the other employees being exposed? That's what I'm wondering about. One employee gets sick, and you're thinking, "Oh no! The other employees are all exposed; now they all have to quarantine! What do you do now?"

HE: Yeah, that was one of the things we struggled with. That was why we switched over to order up at the counter because sometimes, hey, this person was really close to this person last week, so we have to tell them to take a break, or see if they can get tested and talk to us, or something. So, we were really, really low on staff, not only because some people couldn't work, but we had other people who had to quarantine from contact-tracing and all of that stuff.

JS: How do you feel about the national response to the epidemic. Do you feel it could have been better or worse?

HE: I think it could have been better. I also think it could have been worse.

JS: That's diplomatic!

HE: It could have gone both ways. I hate that this year has been so polarizing, as far as just everyone's beliefs about everything, COVID, anything else politically; if you say one thing, that means you're against the other one, for sure. You know, I hate that, because I really believe life should be a balance. I definitely things could have been better, but I think things could have been worse, and I think what we did...I think we did the best with what we knew...it's hard to say.

JS: What are your sources for news?

HE: I try to do all over the place. I don't want to say that I just don't trust...I look a lot at mostly

what the government puts out, itself. Because I feel like that's about as close to real news as I can get. I'm sure they try to soften things up, maybe, but I think our local government has been as honest and open as possible.

JS: Have you had any problems at all with the local government?

HE: No. The lady that comes and does our health inspection, she always comes in and does her inspection, and I can always ask her, "Hey, what do you think is going on; what have you heard?" And if I have any questions...for example, I wasn't sure if I was allowed to have hand sanitizers on the tables, and she said it was fine, just make sure to wipe them down, and that. And she can tell me these are the cases we're seeing, this is how it's looking in Indiana. And I really trust that she knows what she's talking about because she's there. So, I get my new a lot from her every time comes in, honestly.

JS: Has your experience transformed how you think about your family, friends and community?

HE: Yeah, I think it's made me see them in a better light. My family has been very...it's made us closer, I think. When it first started, we were all of one accord - ok, we need to do this, this, and that to protect ourselves, protect everybody else that we know, and we were much closer, although we were already really close. My aunt is a nurse at Eskenazi, and I have other friends and family members here in the community that work either as police officers or firefighters, or you know, all of our first responders. And I think our community is awesome. And I think we've done a good job. I see that our numbers are definitely a lot less than if you go to Indianapolis or Marion County. Part of that, I think, is, yeah, we have a little bit smaller population and we can be more spread apart because it's a suburb, and everything like that; but I think a lot of it also is that we've done what we're supposed to. I haven't had any issues with people coming in without a mask, very few, and they haven't turned it into a big issue. I have been lucky, I will say that. I've been very blessed in that aspect. I've seen a lot of really, really good things from this community, people helping each other. There was this program called "Hunker Down Hoosiers," and they would come and order individually boxed meals. They did it more at the Brownsburg store, I don't think we ever saw it at Plainfield. But it was at the Brownsburg store, where they would order lots of meals, but they had to be individually packaged, and then they would take them to local hospitals and clinics as a donation. So, that was a very cool, little program. They would come, the mom and dad, the kids would be in the car; that way they could all help with that. And you saw the kids were really getting involved, and yeah, I thought it was very cool.

JS: What organization sponsored that?

HE: I'm not sure; I can't remember who they were partnered with.

JS: For the future, knowing what you know now, what is your big takeaway? What do you think individuals, communities and governments should keep in mind for the future, should something like this happen again? Any thoughts?

HE: I think that we should keep in mind that sense of togetherness; I think we should all remember to be for each other and for our community, and not just helping ourselves - thinking about others before ourselves. And I say this, because I saw multiple instances where, like I said before, I'd go to the store and people were just taking everything...

JS: Yes, it was so infuriating!

HE: Yes, it was infuriating, because there was definitely enough for everybody. And what I took away from that was that those people were thinking in their mind, "I'm going to take care of me and my family first."

JS: Kinda makes you worry about an end-of-the-world scenario type of thing, huh?

HE: Yes! Not to hate on them, I get that urgency, that survival mode that I need to take care of my family, but also take care of your community. Because when you take care of your community, you're taking care of yourself.

JS: Brilliant! I love that!

HE: And I think Hendricks, in general, has that mindset, mostly. But maybe just remembering that, and caring for each other as if we were an extended family.

JS: Well, that's a beautiful way to end this!

HE: I'm just very grateful for the opportunity that you've given me to kind of share just a little bit of what we've been through as business owners, and also grateful that you guys are recording this for future generations. Coming from a family that has been through the Holocaust, I think it's really important to remember history so we don't repeat it.

JE: Thank you so much for participating in this project and thank you for your input.